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ATLAS: Geography, Architecture and Change in an Interdependent World

Edited Book

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A Map They Could All Understand

He had brought a large map representing the sea,
Without the least vestige of land:
And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be
A map they could all understand.

Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*

This poem, and the accompanying illustration, *A Map They Could All Understand*, suggests the sheer impossibility of expressing some things in words and images. It is impossible to reach a viewing point from which we can fully account for the myriad ecological social and economic inter-relations: we are simply too enmeshed. By contrast with Carroll's crew of voyagers the landscape that we currently inhabit is very densely packed with symbols, signals and phrases.

With this ATLAS we are attempting to offer some means of navigating present and near-future challenges and to find ways of describing and responding to humanity's state of ecological, economic and cultural interdependence. We aim to do this in a way that respects, but isn't confounded by, its complexity. The writing and images contained in this book serve as a collage of careful but purposeful responses to life in an interdependent world – our own attempt at a 'map we can all understand'.

Our use of the term atlas – with all the completeness and dominion it implies – is intentionally playful. It allows us a nod towards Atlas, the ill-fated hero, doomed to hold up the heavens. We want to acknowledge the seriousness of contemporary political problems but also the hubris of so many responses that point to near at hand and fully formed 'solutions' that has left many people feeling disempowered. But we aim to move through that feeling and leave readers with a sense that these are challenges that can be addressed providing an understanding of the world that enables change.

To do so this ATLAS of interdependence draws together researchers and practitioners from two fields which have a great deal in common, and much to say to each other, but rarely write and work together: that is, geography and architecture. These disciplines share a heritage and present day concerns, responsibilities and expectations. Both draw together the humanities and natural and social sciences and in both fields training, research and practice are deeply inscribed with multi and inter-disciplinary ways of working. Both are concerned with space, place and processes of change – both social and natural. They also share a troubled inheritance of associations with narrow and powerful interests: geography is burdened by its role as colonialism's wayfinder and architecture has long been charged with giving concrete expression and reinforcement to powerful interests. Arguably, these are the spheres of research and practice that have engaged most purposefully with

the issues of living with global environmental change – an issue closely tied up with economic and cultural globalization.

Perhaps more than any other disciplines and professional practices, architecture and geography are expected to respond to, and hold some responsibility for, these challenges.

Critical and speculative thinking is a vital part of both architecture and geography, but it is not enough to critique the forms and structures that actually exist, or even to dream about shaping alternative futures. These are both fields which are implicated in mundane demands to design, construct and maintain built environments. While architecture's link with construction may be more obvious, geography, with its close ties with urban and environmental planning and management, also finds itself involved in the composition of the spaces it studies. A world facing unpredictable environmental changes, along with accelerating socio-cultural flows poses real dilemmas for agents who are obliged to deal with relatively enduring structures.

Therefore at the heart of the ATLAS is the challenge faced by architects, geographers, and researchers and practitioners in related fields, to respond in concrete forms and shapes to the demands of a dynamic planet and globally interdependent economy. It is about planning, designing, crafting, repairing and refitting the spaces we live in for conditions we cannot entirely predict. It is also about recognizing just how much of this composing and recomposing is already being done all around us – and not always by the people we might imagine, or in the places we might expect as the contributions in this book demonstrate. We begin, however, with the idea of rethinking that image at the heart of any atlas, the map.

A more modest mapping

There is an extensive critical literature on the importance of uncovering the intentions and agency of cartographers, and the work mappings can do to further the reach of the powerful. In this ATLAS, however, we attempt to engage in our literal and metaphoric map-making with our hearts on our sleeves. The Interdependence Day project that this book grows out of has set out to sketch 'new maps for an island planet' but to do so in a knowing way. The new ways of thinking and acting made possible by digitized and dematerialized connectivity, as well as the work that can be done by the necessarily static images and texts within this book, open up opportunities to reinforce and extend global solidarities. We see this 'mapping' as also supportive of what Sheila Jasanoff describes as the 'reintegration between global scientific representations of and local social responses to the climate'.¹ We share with her the view that climate change implies a revolutionary reframing of human-nature relations, one that may take decades to accommodate. Yet we also sense that it might be the dynamic, surprising, and perturbing nature of the events disclosed by the sciences of global environmental change that serve to incite and energise this and related projects'.

The covers of the *Whole Earth Catalogs* of the late 1960s and early 1970s carried the strapline 'tools for change' below the then novel and exhilarating images of the Earth from space: 'blue marble' or 'whole earth' and 'earthrise'.² Within three decades such images had become the most ubiquitous photographic images on the planet.³ The more recent *Earthlights* image that is wrapped around the cover of this book serves as a meditative tool that can support thinking about change – human and environmental. It is a remarkable document of the time we are living through – a map but in its electronic form so dynamic that it allows us both to track change and also to participate in it.

Earthlights is a composite satellite image of the Earth from space at night. It is a measure of human thriving and achievement, but also of our reach and impact across the planet. Even the capturing of the image signals something of our ambition and ubiquity: it signals our capacity to splice together a complete image of our planetary home from space. We can update it, tracking minute changes day upon day. It serves as a blunt index of development, with lights going on in Brazil, India and China. A few lights are dimming in Detroit's suburbs, and in numerous other postindustrial districts and worked-out mining areas. Strings of lights mark major transport routes, and these veins of electrical activity are thickening year on year.

The map also hints at human exploitation of the living natural world: the Japanese fishing fleet is visible from space – creating floating islands for the processing of natural resources. At a larger resolution, the gathering evidence that each flare of fossil-fuelled brightness adds to the instability of the global climate brings a new layer of misgiving to the already troubled notion of 'Enlightenment'. *Earthlights* is an image which insinuates that the very process of rendering the world clear and bright contributes to its irresolution and uncertainty: a map that suggests we ought to be thinking of new means of finding our way.

This book starts from the assumption that we haven't got as far as many influential people think in understanding global economic and environmental systems or in responding to crises within these interdependent processes. The contributions all share a sense that we are faced with a body of problems that are urgent and important, but that some of the most prominent responses to date pay little respect to the complexity and unpredictability of the terrain we know we now have to cross.

This ATLAS is characterised by thinking across scales: planetary, urban, human. It comprises a collage of ideas, art based projects, expert witness, stories and scientific responses to global environmental change, settling somewhere between the *Whole Earth Catalog's* unruly mix of local and global ecological fixes and Borges' *Atlas of the Impossible*. It does not attempt to compete with more recent inheritors of the *Whole Earth's* mantle or to act as an exhaustive reference guide to environmental change. Instead it asks afresh what 'tools for access' might be needed by diverse groups with completely different means of participation in the challenges we face. This ATLAS serves as a kind of catalogue for an unprecedented present and an unpredictable future pre-empting desperate or survivalist measures by

exploring creative, experimental and ethical responses that are attuned to rapidly changing terrestrial conditions.

Another mapping reference that helps to explain our approach is that of the Marshall Islanders' stick charts. These navigational devices were used for many hundreds of years up until the middle of the twentieth century, allowing the islanders to find their way between island atolls across an open and apparently featureless ocean. They constructed three-dimensional objects out of palm fronds and shells. The maps were not purely topographic but rather brought together an understanding of the integration of time, space and natural processes, above all ocean swell. The maps weren't taken on journeys but rather learnt as one part of a sharing of knowledge of navigation as an important part of a mnemonic system that held diverse knowledge of the behavior of waves, birds, currents and more. These navigators proceeded by feeling as much as seeing their way.

In similar vein we want to suggest that the pursuit of positive change in an interdependent world will require a very different kind of plotting. On the one hand we resist the grand schemes, master narratives and problem-solution dialectics of twentieth century professions and politics. On the other we step away from the isolated hypercriticism of much contemporary critical social science and humanities.

There are certain principles and practices which have emerged as the key to our mapping:

Interdependence

A defining characteristic of contemporary understandings of many significant ecological, economic and cultural processes is the recognition of dense webs of interdependence. There is no promise of harmony, or an achievable unity in coming to terms with the complex ways that different and often distant entities impact on one other. These processes include interactions that are known, unknown and unknowable, and acknowledging which are which and the relations between them is one part of the challenge faced here.

Interdependence isn't so much a guide to action as a ground condition – a description of our state of being.

Revisions and revaluations

Supporting good decisions will require openness to fairly radical revisions of a body of existing valuations (of economic value; of time; of past, present and future; of the interests of distant others and the non-human). While this at first sight looks like an audacious set of propositions there is plenty of evidence within these contributions that this has been going on in many spheres already, and acknowledging them all in one place starts to add up to a convincing story. Some of these revisions are subtle and /or cultural (e.g. treasuring socially and/or environmentally beneficial practices around food, craft, mobility, healthcare). Some are more explicit, large scale and political

(e.g. establishing an impactful floor price for carbon; establishing funds for redistribution to the most vulnerable to global environmental and economic changes; securing labour and welfare standards globally – hinted at through for example fairtrade initiatives).

Dynamism

Over recent decades, environmental and earth sciences, particularly research related to climate change, have demonstrated that the planet is far more dynamic than most of us ever imagined. At the same time, cumulative human activity is making it even more unstable. Hence we are likely to see more rapid changes in physical systems, and displacement of people and other living things, than we've ever seen before in the entire history of settled human habitation. Economic and political systems have shown themselves to be far more unsettled than recently dominant accounts of globalization had anticipated. There are repeated attempts within this book to try to learn to anticipate and bend or flow with these dynamic processes rather than ignore them or simply stand in their way.

Provisionality

The professions tasked with designing, constructing and maintaining relatively durable structures find themselves working under conditions of increasing ecological and social uncertainty. This predicament suggests the need for an alternative to the dominant paradigm of responses to global changes - that of 'designing for sustainability' - which seeks balance in the context of linear changes on what is assumed to be a largely predictable planet. Although current discourses of resilience go some way to responding to new knowledge of dynamic systems, we push this further towards thinking and action rooted in provisionality. This response to designing under conditions of dynamism is about much more than finding technical definitions of resilience or drafting adaptation strategies: rather, it commits us to calculated risks and decisions without guarantee – and to learning from both the successes and the failures of these wagers.

Creativity

Provisional responses to dynamic situations are necessarily creative and generative rather than formulaic. Many of the contributions underline a sense that designing ways to make the best of a mobile planet is both trial and adventure. Fluctuating conditions compel us to constantly patch up and modify the infrastructures we rely upon, importing a degree of creativity into even the most mundane of tasks. More pronounced changes call for more demanding improvisations; working with the materials and the skills at hand to make old systems function in new ways, or to hatch wholly new systems. In such situations, commands from 'above' tend to struggle, while more distributed and shared responses have a greater chance of keeping pace. This perspective is one that seems to chime with contemporary understandings of personal identity, experimentation and self-expression,

more so at least than the self-constraining, and procedurally oriented framings of many sustainability discourses.

Hospitality, responsibility and care

With trial there is also error. Not all experiments succeed. And even the most bold and creative responses to novel situations may fall short of what is required. To be careful and responsive is also to be willing to respond to those who have been overwhelmed by events, or whose improvisations and experiments have proven inadequate. On a dynamic planet, there will always be some whose ground is more supportive than that of others. But it is not always easy to know what others need, or when and how these needs are best met. In this sense, the kind of welcome or support we might offer those in need is also a kind of improvisation, an experiment in interdependence that has been referred to as 'hospitality' in different times and contexts. And changing conditions means that it is not always clear who is carer and who is being cared for, who is the host and who is the guest: these too are positions that are provisional and fluid. Effective care requires effective noticing. The poet Kathleen Jamie calls for 'care and maintenance of the web of our noticing, paying heed',⁴ and many of the entries pay attention to the quality and scope of our noticing. As with the Marshall Islander stick charts, the contents of this ATLAS point to the value of refining and rehearsing our aptitude for bringing together diverse knowledges and experiences. 'Practicing' and 'noticing' can equip us to understand our responsibilities, but also make us skillful in our responses 'at this place and on this day'.

Politics here and now

All of the above is a move away from the dominant framings of Twentieth century politics. The *Interdependence Day* project that has generated this ATLAS has directly intervened in mainstream political debates and made its own near term proposals and arguments on a range of issues. Nevertheless, the work has been pursued from a particular perspective; that is that politics at the present time should not be about the preparation of grand projects and plans that generate solutions in the wake of 'problem definition'. Rather there are instances where there is a quiet politics to unrecognized practices that are situated and contextualized and have a high value in terms of their ecological or social benefit. These varied ways of doing politics beat a rhythm through the pieces throughout the book wherein 'ground level' decision-making processes and place making practices in specific localized contexts serve to demonstrate that a better world is possible.

Many of the contributions in the book recognize that small- niche based gestures, practices and techniques can be understood as, and are often explicitly intended to be, seed-beds where alternatives to existing regimes and infrastructures are tried out and nurtured. In the context of dense globally distributed and usually 'horizontal' networks of communication these seed-beds and experiments can be rescaled. They nourish and are nourished by international networks of solidarity. But more than that, they also represent a catalogue of deft responses to dynamics and uncertainty. Faced with the

potential for rapid, unpredictable events niche experiments quite suddenly look a lot more pertinent or generalisable than they once did. It is worth recalling that electric light was once a niche experiment itself, yet is now traced across the *Earthlights* image, plotting human economic development. Many of the experimental, creative practices discussed here may not be visible from space, but they are nonetheless multiplying, proliferating and connecting up.

Our ATLAS, then, is not a book of maps, in the sense of representations of a world already made, or a set of blueprints of worlds that ought to be constructed. It is more a collection of tracings and probings of worlds which are currently in the making. It is a guide to journeys that open new pathways; connections that may become networks; practices that could become effective institutions and niche experiments which might nourish purposeful change.

¹ Jasanoff, Sheila, *A New Climate for Society*, Theory Culture and Society 2010 Vol. 27 (2-3) p. 235.

² NASA image AS08-14-2383 taken by the astronaut William Anders on the Apollo 8 mission, dated 24 December 1968, has come to be known as 'Earthrise'; NASA image AS17-148-22727 from Apollo mission 17, 7 December 1972, is commonly referred to as the 'blue marble' or 'whole earth' image.

³ Cosgrove, Denis, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*, John Hopkins University Press (2003).

⁴ Jamie, Kathleen, *Findings*, Sort Of Books (2005) p. 109.