

# Burn It, Bury It, or Send it On a Caribbean Cruise

In August 1966, *Life* magazine published “Planet Earth by Dawn’s Early Light,” a photo essay from the *Gemini 10* space flight. Capturing the Earth from the most remote perspective to date, the series of photographs concluded with a picture of a small floating figure in silhouette: a single trash bag suspended hundreds of miles above the surface of the planet. The plastic bag contained the objects that NASA

intended to leave behind before the mission’s return flight to Earth. In extraterrestrial space, trash aspired to be matter out of place. A few years later, the iconic “Blue Marble” photograph captured the Earth for the first time in its entirety.

From a distance of 45,000 kilometers, the planet appeared to be a hermetic figure set off against a black, indeterminate ground. Earth appeared covered in cloud, with barely a glimpse of terrain, and with no trace of human technology. Juxtaposed next to the Blue Marble photograph, the *Gemini 10* photograph highlights an embarrassing intrusion into this desired outside, depicting a material evidence of the human occupation of space. The editors of *Life* were quick to point to that. The photo essay concluded with a short essay on the larger menace of the “growing clutter” of space trash, alerting readers to over 1,200 large objects in orbit and which “someday could cause a serious traffic problem in space.” Trash-in-orbit was no longer matter out of concern. Trash mattered. The future, it seemed, might well depend on humanity’s prescient efforts to regulate those vestiges of development. Otherwise, the editors noted, just as cities had become clogged with animal waste and garbage, space trash could eventually become the proper concern of extraterrestrial street cleaners.

The material politics were similar on the ground. Trash was regarded as the symbol of the aberration of a consumer society, the response to which was to remove trash from the realm of occupation and into domains of containment. The polyethylene plastic liner of the household trash bag and the sanitary landfill in the landscape delimited boundaries around objects, keeping trash at some visual and olfactory distance. The organization of trash at a territorial scale similarly organizes waste

**Rania Ghosn**

University of Michigan

**El Hadi Jazairy**

University of Michigan



management. Urban infrastructures carve out enclaves of space where objects are discarded into landfills. Located along territorial peripheries, next to disfavored populations and surrounded by major arteries and highways, landfills are made barely noticeable from urban centers. “The filthy cities of history, which sat in a clear countryside,” observed Kevin Lynch, “are succeeded by clean cities encircled at some distance by their wastes.”<sup>1</sup> They are covered daily in dirt and capped by a green carpet. Once enclosed, odorless, and away, trash may be subsequently be dropped out of representation. Indeed, “clean” urbanism has rested on technologies of trash management, on the city’s capacity to divest itself of the environmental costs of consumer culture. The disposal of trash in the periphery and below a green sanitary cap, coupled with a disciplinary analysis of the urban at a city-scale, contributes to keeping such sites out of sight.

In 1987, the Mobro 4000 infamously hauled 3,000 tons of trash from New York to Belize and back until it was finally incinerated in Brooklyn and the ash buried where it originated. “Burn it, bury it, recycle it, or send it on a Caribbean cruise,” were the four things Ed Koch, former mayor of New York City, said could be done with trash in the wake of the roaming “Garbage” episode. The mediagenic incident was emblematic of a “garbage crisis” that equated the significance of the question of space in waste management to the availability of disposal sites. This perspective on trash removes from representation the organizational relations of trash and geography, and limits design’s ability to formalize strategies towards waste disposal in environmental imaginaries.

The history of the word “trash” is obscure. The etymology suggests Scandinavian origins, where “trask” refers to the twigs cut-off of lumber. Trash results from preparing an object for a system of use. Those parts that are of no use must be removed and cast aside.<sup>2</sup> Such systems of classification require a category for those things that will not fit. Following Mary Douglas’ famous discussion of dirt, trash could be called “matter out of place.”<sup>3</sup> Yet such definition holds an ontological difficulty. Trash only becomes a category when something is thrown away, burned, abandoned, or deemed unsanitary and fed to the dogs. Inherently, trash does not exist outside human work; rather, it is always inside. Moreover, the threshold that determines what classifies as trash does not precede our individual decisions to throw something away. Instead, we continuously preform the bounding of our waste management system. When and where an individual creates trash is not an isolated decision, but part of a larger infrastructure of waste production and management that establishes which things have value and which things are worthless. The category of trash becomes continuously defined as a social practice, suggesting distinct territories, and ultimately a vast geography of trash.

The episodes of the Gemini spaceflight and the Mobro 4000 hauling underline that waste management in the age of environment is at the scale of the geographic. If the abstraction of space conceals the social,



political, and ecological imperatives of waste systems, could the reassertion of the geographic reinscribe urban technologies within the practices of design disciplines? By spatially grounding the question of waste, we seek to identify trash's materialist, political, and representational geographies. From this standpoint, the project aims to shift the public discussion on trash management from the moral imperative of a "garbage crisis"—a managerial debate on technological fixes that protect the environment—and into the political domain on the drawing of trash boundaries and trash formations. The search for trash space is totally transformed once it is portrayed simultaneously in the world and inside its networks of production. At first look, the trash bag is contained within well-defined limits. Then, through dynamic assemblage, one discovers entities and boundaries that seem to have been there all along but were not visible before and that appear in retrospect necessary for its sustenance. From this perspective, waste management does not operate as "matter out of place." Rather, trash systems are territorially embedded: They are paradoxically inscribed within the peripheries of the township grid and in turn produce boundaries in space.

The papers to follow explore the spatial deployment of trash systems that speculate on alternative formal possibilities of waste, and through such design provocations re-form disciplinary and public debates on urban systems and the production of space. They respond to a set of provocations: What are the design conditions of the mass burning, burial, abandonment, or exile of economic excess and what new contexts and rituals might designers project? What are some design tools that can allow us to conceptualize, approach, and shape the relations of trash and space? How can the pivotal presence of trash be depicted? How do we move away from the mode of invisibility of iconic environmental imagery to inquiry into a possible agency of design in relation to technological systems?

If the externalization of waste depoliticizes it as "matter out of place" and renders it a non-issue, then an inquiry into the space of trash brings such technological practices into the domain of public controversies. To underscore the geographic of trash is to thus reassert the centrality of space in the containment of costs and the production of value in urban regimes. By unfolding some instances of the system, this panel inquires into how our social relations are organized and reproduced through space. The geographic offers a way of thinking about the containment surface itself as an ethical site to reconfigure the aesthetic assumptions and political relations upon which the separation rests. The challenge of the geographic is however not only to render visible the inequality between a distribution of spaces and time and a distribution of capacities and power.<sup>4</sup> Above all, the geo-graphic—literally, the writing of the surface of the Earth—elicits an intervention within power and its representations in ways that make a difference. ♦

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This essay is an excerpt of *Geographies of Trash*, a research publication funded by the University of Michigan Taubman College Research on the City, an initiative of Dean Monica Ponce de Leon to incentivize interdisciplinary research on the challenges on the contemporary city. The authors would like to thank the following individuals for their contribution to the research: Ben Hagenhofer, Christina Kull, Hans Papke, Jonathan Puff, and Aaron Weller.

## ENDNOTES

1. Kevin Lynch, *Wasting Away* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990).
2. "trash, n.1". OED Online., June 2012. <<http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/205217?rskey=qgydHV&result=1>> (accessed July 25, 2012).
3. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966): pp. 35-9.
4. Jacques Rancière, "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics," *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009): pp. 109-132.