# Île de Nantes—Designerly Ways of Recognition

The increasing number of abandoned industrial sites over the last half century can be considered a waste- or by-product of urban development. What we understand as waste from an urban development perspective, and not least what we do with it, are central themes in the sustainability discussion. This is a discussion that is increasingly reduced to a question of technology which in industrial areas primarily translates as pollution issues (Hauxner 2010: 244). Seen from this perspective, the French landscape architect and architect Alexandre Chemetoff is of particular interest due to his Île de Nantes project. Here he provides a new framework for understanding urban metabolism from a development perspective, and demonstrates how urban development can be seen as an open-ended process. This article presents and discusses Chemetoff's innovative approach using a theoretical framework drawing on contemporary philosophical discussions of the convergence between ethics and aesthetics, and the ethics of recognition. This article focuses on the transformation of the island, Île de Nantes, located in the Loire River in southwest France. Between 2000 and 2010, Chemetoff conducted a process to transform the island, which formerly housed industrial and port activities, into an integral part of the city of Nantes. Based on on-site observations, published project material, literature studies, and interviews with Chemetoff himself, Chemetoff's work and working methods are examined and discussed, based on the theory that the completed transformations may articulate both the transition's implicit value, and the working methods employed. This work appears to be grounded on an appreciative approach, with parallels in the ethics of recognition found in recent social and political philosophy. This leads to a new starting point for design practice and further connects Chemetoff's principles concerning "cultivating differences" and "economizing sites," discussions of recognition and identity, and a reflection on what we understand by sustainability. This is a design practice praising the relational, dynamic, and fluid rather than the object and the static.

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>ILE DE NANTES : L'INVENTAIRE RAISONNÉ DES CONSTRUCTIONS.
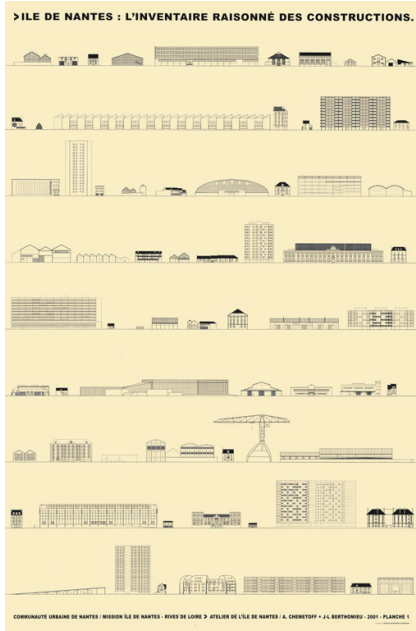
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Figure 1. The initial site surveys include considerations of both the island as a whole, and architectural elements such as material components. Here, architectural elements are displayed
(source: Chemetoff 2010b).

WASTE

Waste is an inevitable part of dynamic systems, including the city (Berger 2006: 12). However, it is not clear what is or is not waste, which values we attach to it, and what action-horizons this understanding determines. This is clearly shown by an etymological study of the most commonly used terms; terrain vague, Brachen, and waste. This triad is the basis of the vocabulary used when talking about abandoned industrial areas: frisches industrielles, brownfields, ruinas industrialis, among others (Braae 2003: 89-93). Terrain refers to a large area and vague indicates an oscillation, uncertainty and variability (de Solà Morales 1996). One can describe the German term Brachen within both an agrarian-economic and an industrial-economic perspective. The first denotes Brachen as a practice whereby plots of land are systematically removed from cultivation with the aim of improving the soil's performance, thereby ensuring a long-term, perhaps everlasting, yield. Here, Brachen has positive connotations. In an industrial-economic perspective however, the exact opposite is true; it refers to a complete and final depletion of value where the remainder has, in principle, no value (Hoffmann-Axthelm 1991). Waste is the most ambiguous of the three terms, ranging from something positive through neutral to negative. Waste or leftovers can both mean to leave/reserve something for later (i.e., to have extra resources) and is therefore positive. It can also be understood as a neutral or insignificant side-effect, or as something useless, even negative (Lynch 1990). This semantic instability demonstrates that the value does not lie in the 'thing' itself, but in the traits we ascribe to it. These values are related as much to their potential as to their immediate state. It is precisely this potential that deserves respect according to the philosopher of recognition, Charles Taylor (Taylor 1994: 41). This makes the design of urban development particularly interesting, as value becomes apparent through future use. This finding challenges the traditional relationship between architecture and planning, where the latter creates a framework for the former, which exhausts all of the available potentials or valuable aspects, leaving little room for further use. Reuse-thinking requires that any kind of 'consumption,' permits future use.

VALUE IN THE WORTHLESS

The value of the seemingly worthless, or of that which is associated with something negative—ideologically infested, contaminated or unaesthetic—is largely culturally defined. Now, many consider the extensive housing built in the 1970s to be an ugly structural mistake. Similarly, we find beauty in the dilapidated industrial estates, which were regarded as necessary evils just a few decades ago. Our current standards and practices determine these valuations, both explicitly and implicitly. From a societal perspective, there is a significant task in rethinking waste produced by urban recycling, to return it to a positively charged circulation. This is a core task of 'designers,' understood here as professions that give form to our physical surroundings (e.g., architects, landscape architects, or planners). The designers, through their creative processes, have the possibility to assign a positive value to the otherwise worthless or negatively charged. As the first step in the design process, which involves investigation and processing, we

must overcome these negative prejudices to work impartially with the material and invest our interest within it. There is therefore both a need and a demand for an appreciative approach—a 'politics of recognition' in the context of urban development's waste production.

RECOGNITION

The appreciative approach is thereby connected to a significant postmodern theory, namely the ethics of recognition. It derives from the philosopher, Hegel, and his reflections on the human individual's pursuit of recognition. The appreciative approach builds on a particular understanding of subjectivity and culture, where the individual is considered in its specific cultural context. Within political philosophy and sociology, it is principally divisions of gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality that set the framework for the culturally specific. This is the basis of the discussion about the multicultural society, in which the central characters are the German philosopher Axel Honneth and the Canadian Charles Taylor. Appreciation of another person is based on recognition of the group or groups to which they belong; the culturally specific thereby decides what is 'good.' Recognition is thus an essential component of 'identity' policy which, following the criticism of Modernist planning, has characterized urban development discussions in recent decades. Here, the focus is on place identity, local practices, and cultures —often understood as the only mediating links between the individual and the larger, global chaos (Nielsen 2008: 49). But the philosophy of recognition can also play a different role. In relation to problems of waste, it can be used both to (1) identify 'groups' or 'cultures' that are relevant to understanding what constitute specific types of waste, and more importantly, (2) to integrate aesthetics, in accordance with recognition ethics. By inverting the perspective and looking at an alternative to the recognition view on waste, the need and demand are evident. The alternative would be rejection. Precisely this approach is the least productive from a sustainability perspective, as to reject something is the same as to exclude elements from a holistic approach. It is this positive attention to the present, the 'as found,' that is a highly characteristic feature of Chemetoff's Île de Nantes project, to be discussed shortly. First, some reflections on what is understood as good urban development.

CONVERGENCE BETWEEN THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL

The relationship between our ideas of what is good and what is aesthetically appealing, between ethics and aesthetics, can, according to the German philosopher Gernot Böhme, shed light on current urban development. He claims: "We live in the consumer society, we live in the event society and that is why the adequate form of life is the aesthetic one" (Böhme 2005: 107). Ethics and aesthetics are traditionally portrayed as opposites. This forces a lifestyle choice—either to follow ethical, moral principles or to follow the transient and sensual. Böhme's point is that today these previously polar opposites seem to converge; the good life is now also the comfortable and eventful life, where aesthetics may supersede ethics. Within the so-called pragmatic thinking, the American philosopher Richard Rorty has launched the Nietzschean idea of an aesthetic way of life, where the individual is in a

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Figure 2. Maintaining even small and insignificant buildings contributes to the diversity that currently characterizes Île de Nantes (photo: E. Braae).

permanent process of self-creation. This means, in addition to an absence of universal values, that 'the good'—the ethical dimension—is present if something works for us here and now. This idea of an ethic based on an aesthetic choice, and thus dependent on specific circumstances, is of course controversial. But as Rorty justly argues, the individual is not autonomous, but exists by virtue of relationships and thereby recreates itself through relationships—also relationships to its environment (Nielsen 2008: 43 ff.). This brings the discussion back to an ethic where the community's quality of life depends on the individual's aesthetic choices. However, new pragmatism's integration of the ethical and the aesthetic points back to a pre-modern philosophy, with a major difference however, in that today we do not assume that there exists an a priori truth, and therefore perceive the relationship to be dynamic and context-dependent.

PLANNING WITHOUT A MASTER PLAN

In the southern French city of Nantes, lies the island of Île de Nantes, in the Loire river, close to the old city center. Here we find 337 hectares of land, previously used for port operations and ship industry, which closed down during the 1980s partly due to the relocation of the industrial port to Saint Nazaire, 60 km away. Today, the two cities are working together to develop a network of urban centers along the river, where a major task is to integrate Île de Nantes into the urban development of Nantes, and to turn the face of the existing cities towards the river. In 2000-2010, Chemetoff, along with architect Jean-Louis Berthomieu were selected to manage the transformation, during which, the SAMOA development company was founded. Today, a different team carries out the conversion process, but the focus here will be on the efforts of Chemetoff.

At the beginning of the project, the island with its 13,000 residents and 15,000 workplaces was partially active, but much was dilapidated and unused. Overall, the island's appearance was significantly different from the surrounding city because of its industrial past. A traditional planning process would develop a vision for how the area should develop in the future. A vision such as this is typically communicated through a comprehensive plan, a master plan, and a number of visualizations of the leading architectural concepts and most prominent places. Chemetoff meanwhile, did not deliver a master plan, visualizations, or descriptions of a potential urban life. Instead, he introduced a development tool, a plan-guide with surveys, and methods for mapping, monitoring, and intervention. Behind this is the idea that every place is established through its relationships, and that an area such as Île de Nantes is in constant change. Change is its essence. Embedded in the movement are the changes that the actual transformation process gives rise to, which over time has shaped the place through successive transformations (Chemetoff 2010a: 72). It is only possible to capture these changes as glimpses of temporal impacts, and Chemetoff is quite aware of the risk of including his own contribution in an open and unfinished process. However, he emphasizes the desire to "cultivate differences" rather than let the whole transformation be "displayed as a banner" (Chemetoff 2009: 18). He thus prioritizes a thorough and complex understanding of the
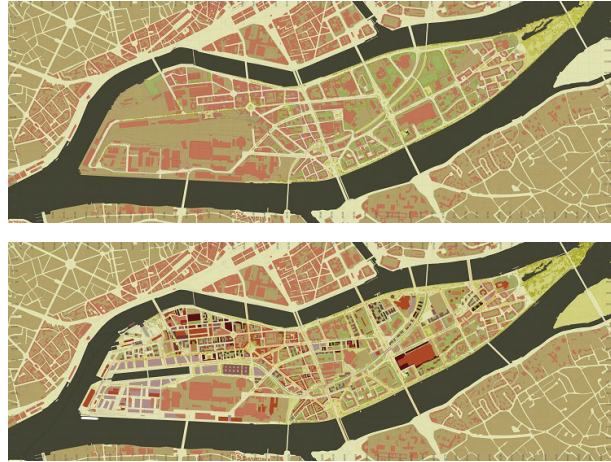
actual place, at the expense of communicating it to the outside world. This understanding or recognition of 'as found' is an expression of an 'economy of means' approach that permeates Chemetoff's methods (Chemetoff 2010a: 27). Careful on-site registration of materials, their aesthetic qualities, structural principles, contexts, and contemporary applications were undertaken. Thus he uses the modernist credo 'less is more' or 'moins c'est plus' to describe the effort, rather than the architectural result; his point is that one achieves greater diversity by doing less.

The features of the existing, that architects often focus on, namely the way material structures are represented, do not play a significant role in Chemetoff's work. The site is primarily read through physical presence rather than through drawings or spatial representations. This method has the direct consequence that interventions stemming from the empathetic surveys, in turn reflect the scope of this on-site perception. Each intervention is geographically limited to what we can call a mesoscale and microscale. Through these small, well-defined interventions and their interaction with, and distribution on the island, they influence both the Île de Nantes as well as the island's relationship to its surroundings. As Chemetoff puts it, "we play with singularities," whereby "everything that is not changed, is changed through that which has been changed" (Chemetoff 2009a: 29 and 83). It is thus both a 'spread work' (une oevre dispersée, Chemetoff 2010: 22) and an 'open work,' because of its unfinished and constant development. The interventions appear to be completed actions, but in fact inspire new appropriations and interventions. Overall, the transformation consists of individual projects with a greater focus on the relationships within and between elements and projects, than the things themselves (Chemetoff 2010: 41).

REPRESENTATION AND PRODUCTION
The plan-guide consists of successive mappings, which reflect the site as it is as well as its planned interventions. Two plans are thereby overlaid, collecting the present and the future in one. By virtue of the plan's quarterly update, it becomes a dynamic tool for registering and updating changes

Figure 3. The plan-guide is a dual map, simultaneously displaying a detailed site survey, the place as it is; and "le tracé vectorisé", as it will be. The map was updated every three months up until Chemetoff's contract expired in 2010. Here is a survey map from 2003 and a dual map from 2008 (source: Chemetoff 2010b).
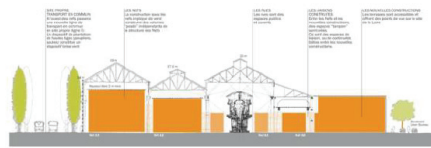
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Figure 4. The local activity "Les Machines de l'Île" was a generating force for the transformation of the Alstom Halls in the "Nefs des Chantiers" area (source: Chemetoff 2010b).

and reacting to these (Fig. 3). The plans in themselves do not steer the interventions, instead these can be considered as 'edits' in an existing 'text,' where this text is not a complete picture of the project, but rather periodic aggregations of on-site observations. The effect of one intervention forms the basis for the next, while notions of future interventions occur in parallel. Chemetoff, one could argue, stands offset from Walter Benjamin's core åconsideration, that architectural drawings simultaneously represent and produce architecture (Benjamin 1988: 89–90).

Chemetoff's interventions are steered by the desire to preserve as much of the existing structure as possible: to direct actions toward primarily public spaces to create a link between the scattered parts, thus giving a framework for future development; to create coherence through diversity; and finally to orient both the open spaces and the buildings toward the river. The main strategy is to link the interventions with the public spaces, and thereby stimulate private initiatives—a practice that is parallel to the comprehensive renewal of Paris's urban centers. This took place during the 1990s through the conversion of a number of industrial sites into new parks, which in turn enabled the generation of new construction and the renovation of the surrounding buildings. In the case of Île de Nantes, the 'park' is a promenade around the whole island. A transverse transportation route was also downgraded, and an area around a large, modern shopping mall was reworked. These public spaces are the project's backbone, while the rest remains open for private investment. Many architectural resources are invested in the current observations and innovations, and relatively few in actual material inputs. Proto-works are often initiated to gain knowledge about what can be done, how things work, what new challenges a particular intervention-form might pose, and how the surrounding world might respond. The acquired knowledge is passed through a reflective process and alters the direction of other projects and future interventions. A master plan cannot accommodate this reflective and co-creative practice, as it is based on an expectation that the vision has sufficient strength and is able to meet changing needs and expectations.

TRANSCENDING DESIGN METHODS

The working methods span the phases of establishment and operation, which in construction budgets traditionally represents two distinct entities. The work includes restorations, paying special attention to the existing; reparations, because not everything should be discarded and remade; transformations, combining new and existing structures; and new designs. The whole is permeated by an obligation to 'see' things anew, to conceive something new and innovative. These approaches combine a thorough on-site knowledge with the production process, normally dominant in architectural practice, namely creating something out of nothing or pure imagination, 'ex nihilo'. These approaches—on-site and ex nihilo—are here combined in a practice where the place is integral in the development of the program. Where the site's characteristics set the framework for future use.

Although Chemetoff is not committed to everything 'as found,' he still builds his project on the aesthetics of the existing, though not from images,

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which he finds to be directly "disturbing because they freeze the development of a process and prevent reality from appearing" (Chemetoff 2009: 6). He thereby commits himself to work that improves and transforms what already is, respecting its evolving character. This is based on an ethic that first recognizes the existing, however particular it may be. "Learning to love today's world is to adopt other people's bad taste as a way of making happiness available to everyone. Urban planning and architecture serve the purpose of revisiting the past years' production—not to bring it in line with contemporary taste, but to find a place for each thing in today's city" (Chemetoff 2009: 14). It is also an aesthetic approach that draws on the specific perception, the sentient body, which is characterized by two factors—sensitivity and excess. Aesthetic sensitivity differs from aesthetic experience, while aesthetic experience has an ethical and cognitive quality—an 'expanded way of thinking' (Jørgensen 2003). Excess is embedded in the synthesizing process where the experience, the 'reading,' the interpretation, and the new aspects are crystallized through 'editing' or intervention. The perspective at Île de Nantes, however, is not only aesthetic: "If the project does not affect the material conditions of lifestyle and only accompanies the same manners of inhabiting, working, shopping and having fun, then architecture is merely the aesthetic packaging of programs that nobody ever questions any more. I rebel against standardization, which projects the aesthetics and standards of a few onto everyone" (Chemetoff 2009: 22).

PRACTICE-BASED KNOWLEDGE

The ancient philosopher Aristotle's concept of ethics relates more to practice than theory, and involves an overarching principle of 'moderation.' This is connected to the idea of 'phrónesis,' which denotes a practical, common-sense-driven and solution-oriented approach to a specific problem. This focus includes a particularism and sensitivity that relies on close observation, which thereby associates it with 'aisthesis.' In this way, ethics and aesthetics are connected—founding ethics in aesthetics and making the two inseparable (Grabes 1996: 14-15). Referring to this approach as pragmatism, one could argue, is precisely what describes the working methods used by Chemetoff. His appreciative form of practice is a supporting ethic, which is attached to a commonsense solution-oriented action that draws on

Figure 5. The Banana Hangar along the Quai des Antilles—part of the island's, and thus Nantes's, new public promenade. Before and after pictures show the minimal intervention. Daniel Buren's art installation with rings along the quay can be seen here, which together with the mobile elephant at 'Nef de Chantier' has become synonymous with the island's transformation (source Chemetoff 2010b).

the present situation: phrónesis. After having decided to reuse the Alstom buildings because of their size, Chemetoff begins to unwrap them layer by layer to look for something useful and a way of using the 'as found.' A creative, artistic interpretation, as can be described by another of Aristotle's three knowledge forms, téchne, denoting knowledge of creation or genesis. The cornerstone of Chemetoff's approach is a strong material consciousness, where 'material' is a reference both to materiality and to a physical resource. Thus he points indirectly to a sustainability rationale that combines ethics with aesthetics, without insisting on a specific sustainability aesthetic. On the contrary, each new observation is the starting point for a new aesthetic experience—and materialistic handling process—which leads indirectly to the revaluation of that which was previously thought worthless. Although ethics may appear to precede aesthetics, this is not necessarily the case. There is an architectural and aesthetical challenge and rewarding experience in developing knowledge about a specific place through long-term iterative readings and interventions. In other words, by exploring its inherent potential, as Taylor emphasizes. It is a journey of discovery to penetrate the surface, and through the understanding of traces accumulated over time, to develop programs integrated with the specific site. There is an aesthetic tension between intervention, and that which is being intervened, which makes this kind of transformation process a worthy challenge. Through this, he also reveals a way to reconsider recycling and waste management.

CONCLUSION

Chemetoff wants "to find a place for each thing in today's city" (Chemetoff 2009: 14) and opens with his specific instructions on how the material, understood as actual materials, architectural elements (Fig. 1), even an entire island, can through subtle interventions be attributed value and thus be secured a place in the modern city. Architectural interventions are supported by an aesthetic/ethical practice, which very consistently builds on on-site observations and interventions through a successive, reflexive, and relational process, whose fundamental purpose is to realize possible undiscovered potentials. This appreciative approach is difficult to realize, because urban development today is largely played out in market terms, where 'products' are easier to communicate and sell than 'processes.' Nevertheless, Chemetoff attempts to connect the realization of the potential of a place with a discussion about sustainability that exceeds the typically narrow technical or resource-based perspective. He emphasizes the recycling of available material resources to add value in a way that is made explicit and legible, through an understanding of local practices that keep the field open for future developments and their potential added value. ◆

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