

# Performing Nation Making: On Landscape Architectural Choreographies and Performative Borders in the South China Sea

Landscape architecture has become central to the geopolitics of claiming sovereignty through establishing a territorial footprint. However, as said footprint is as much an event as it is an object, this paper shall raise critical awareness of how geopolitically inclined architects can actively intervene in large-scale natural processes, in which borders become complex systems in evolution, whose physical manifestations coincide with the terms of their representation.

## **INSTRUMENTALIZED FORMALISMS**

For the past centuries, numerous institutions have warned that the impact of climate change will be felt around the world, including in some of the world's low-lying coastal regions and island nations. We now live in an era when natural island nations are at risk of becoming ghost states. In 2014, as the world community is just about to grapple with what is to come, a New Zealand court has granted residency to a family from an island nation averaging about two meters above sea level.<sup>1</sup> An era of climate change refugeeism has begun. However, the geopolitical dimensions of landscape architectural logistics such as the interplay of sinking or artificially reclaimed islands are presently both absent from the realms of urban discourse as well as virtually unexplored in their architectural potential.

In fact, never before in history has humankind extracted, transported, shifted, processed, and reproduced more soil and minerals. Paradoxically, while minerals presently represent the largest material stream on earth, urban discourse has tended to focus its attention on visible urbanization processes, whereas invisible subsurface infrastructure is often ignored or taken for granted. To the extent of being treated as two different and separate disciplinary entities in the field, the visible realm belongs to the architect, landscape architect, and urban planner while the invisible realm belongs to the civil engineer. However, this distinction

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does not correspond to the reality of urbanization processes. Simultaneously engaging the surface and subsurface, visible urbanization both requires and entails subsurface urbanization, and vice versa.<sup>2</sup>

While it is fascinating to theoretically reflect on the architect as a geomorphic agent and to consider his ambition on a territorial level, landscape architecture has practically already become central to the geopolitics of claiming sovereignty through establishing a territorial footprint in the case of the South China Sea. Legally, under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), governments may designate areas within 200 nautical miles of their coasts as exclusive economic zones. Yet, despite pre-established zones and national historic claims intersecting across the ocean, nations claim sovereignty over rocks, shoals, reefs, banks, and cays to extend their territorial footprint and establish national outposts for asserting ownership of fishing grounds, oil, and gas believed to lie beneath.

According to UNCLOS, an island is a 'naturally formed area of land, surrounded by water, which is above water at high tide'. Further, rocks which cannot 'sustain human habitation or economic life of their own' shall have no exclusive economic zone.<sup>3</sup> Yet, nations artificially reclaim islands for often enormously impractical usage only rendered practical by a combination of laws and culture. In a perverse logic, instead of merely being physically subdivided and landformed by rules and norms, these combinations of laws and culture actively forced these islands into existence. As an inverse form of informal urbanisms, these islands are an instrumentalized formalism of geopolitical intent at the fringe of the high end.

#### **EPHEMERAL BORDERS**

As entire nations are confined and defined by precise natural borders, peaks, glacial ridges, shorelines, sand depositions, and the meeting of air and sea have been marked, altered, and colonized by systems of control that played a fundamental role in the definition of the modern sovereign state. Where landscape features delineate countries, they are typically considered to be the permanent,

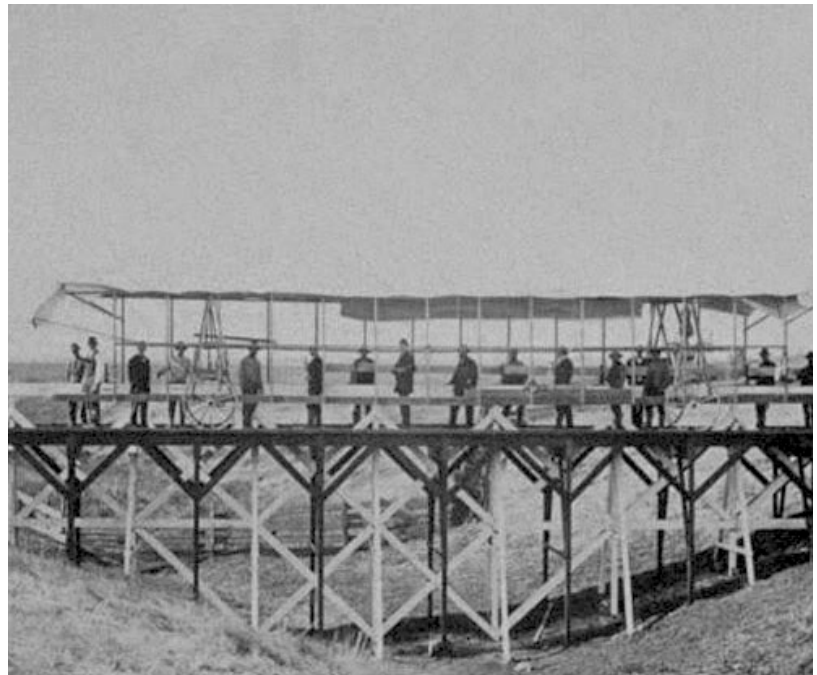


Figure 1: Yolo Buggy, UC Berkeley Bancroft Library 1

cauterized boundaries of a country, perhaps altered by socio-historical events such as border disputes, invasions, or treaties, but not in-and-of-themselves unstable.

However, on a geological time scale, no construct is stable. Islands are as much events as they are objects. As ephemeral events, they are primarily composed of processes of accretion and erosion. In fact, it might be reasonable to understand these events as geology, with all the inherent instability, flux, and unpredictability that is implied by the study of geological events. Where geographic or atmospheric processes are the basis for a shifting definition of territory, climate change and contested resource claims will have a very literal effect on the size and shape of nations.

In other words, sovereign territories are divided in part by events instead of fixed geography. Contradictory territorial claims crisscross the disputed South China Sea, one of the busiest areas of commercial shipping traffic, where overfishing exhausts catches close to shorelines and economic growth has outpaced oil supplies. While diplomats talk and military surveillance pictures surface of land reclamation of artificial islands on claimed rocks in the area, navies raise flags, fishermen are arrested, and oil rigs are blockaded.<sup>4</sup>

### **BORGESIAN CIRCUS**

In parallel, used to establish land maps and boundaries for ownership, locations, or purposes of policy and legal frameworks, land surveying is the technique, profession, and science of accurately determining the terrestrial or three-dimensional position of points and the distances and angles between them. However, as it can be observed in the case of the South China Sea, literally shaping nations through a series of highly choreographed landscape architectural techniques, architects as expert generalists can actively intervene in these processes through design.<sup>5</sup> Borders become complex systems in evolution, whose physical manifestations coincide with the terms of their representation.

In contrast, land surveying is commonly a static process in an assembly of optical devices for measuring the landscape. Dating back to the 19th century, the historic Yolo Buggy construction - a building, field shelter, and geopolitical laboratory for measuring the borders of an American county - was a technique, profession, and science of accurately determining geographical information on wheels, an itinerant building for measuring borders. By leaving small physical markers, its ambition was to make an invisible geographic line across the landscape politically real, in order to mathematically understand, thus, to tax, police, and regulate, the western terrain of the United States.

The resulting political baseline and geometries that emerged from it allowed its team of land surveyors to establish a constant point of cartographic reference for future mapping expeditions and charts. At the scale of 1:1, the building helped teams of state surveyors perform political acts of measurement across the landscape. Thus, as a kind of Borgesian circus, a traveling circus of optical devices for measurements across the landscape, the itinerant building reminds one of a short story co-authored by J. L. Borges and A. Casares. Said one-paragraph short story entitled 'On Exactitude in Science' is a literary hoax on the map-territory relation. It imagines an empire where the science of cartography becomes so exact that only a map on the same scale as the empire itself will suffice.<sup>6</sup>



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Figure 2: Sand Dredging Machinery

### NEGOTIATING LOOPHOLES

This relationship between construction, representation, survey, cartography, and geography is especially relevant in the context of borders, which are not permanently determined but actually shift back and forth. As an exemplary case, subject to tidal movement and rising sea levels, halfway between Japan and the Philippines in the Pacific Ocean, and of deep national interest to both Japan and China, the low-lying coral patch Okinotori may or may not include a pair of islands. And rather than solely being a dispute over who owns the atoll, the dispute indirectly is about the status of the atoll itself. If the atoll is a series of islands, it extends Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). If it is a series of rocks, then Japan has no such claim. In 2004, the Chinese started calling the coral patch rocks.

The disputed region illustrates what the value of accepting an unstable design process when designing at a geologic scale might be, how processes of accretion and erosion can be incorporated into the design of an architectural intervention. To preserve the alleged islands, Japan surrounded the coral patch in 60m diameter concrete sea walls. In reference to the UNCLOS, slits in the walls are meant to ensure that the 'naturally formed' land remains 'surrounded by water'. In a perverse logic, while a concrete barrier is not natural, reef grown from transplanted coral in the shelter of artificial structures is. Installed in 2007, a solar-powered unmanned lighthouse is meant to provide 'economic life' to the islands. An ongoing project to preserve the rocks and encourage new coral growth continues because it is critical that the islands are formed naturally.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, virtual loopholes in legal frameworks and conventions are physically renegotiated through the design of landscape architectural choreographies. Artificially enhancing its landmass through reefs, using reef seeds and eggs, Japan is now growing coral reefs in a bid to extend its territorial sovereignty into the Philippine Sea. Successfully transplanting and cultivating these reefs would allow Japan to protect an EEZ off its coast, expanding its maritime power. According to UNCLOS, Japan can lay exclusive claim to the natural resources 370km from its shores. Thus, if these outcrops are Japanese islands, the EEZ stretches far beyond the coast of the main islands of Japan then it would do otherwise. Ironically, with sea levels expected to continue to rise, Japan may not be able to grow coral fast enough to bolster its claim.

### EMPTY SHELL POTENTIALS

Conflicting with the relatively slow process of semi-natural growth, these kinds of artificial islands tend to be inhabited as briefly as possible. Expensive, complicated, risky and barely functional constructions are bound to be abandoned as soon as the levels of the sea, the winds of international law, the economy etc. shift.

In 'Risk Society's Cosmopolitan Moment', Ulrich Beck suggests that being at risk is the human condition at the beginning of the twenty-first century. He argues that, while risk produces inequality and destabilization, it can be the catalyst for the construction of new institutions.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the artificial islands described, urgent architectural interventions and inventive modes of construction are often required. Who will inhabit them and what will the islands become when the virtual frameworks that sustains them inevitably change? Can we think about a different kind of architecture that is not only a direct consequence of crisis — an intentional form, a military intervention — but a more stable,



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Figure 3: Chinese Lighthouse, Subi Reef (2012)



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flexible, and long-term egress-plan that could anticipate, even incorporate, future potentials?

The possession of land and territory has not always been a recognized marker of political sovereignty. Sand is here being swept up into a model of human governance that has only existed for a few hundred years, and which may only exist for a few decades more. Under a different political system, these artificial reefs and islands would be quite literally meaningless. Otherwise put, the islands are potentially deemed to be of no long-term use. Under a contingency plan devised for an outcome other than the expected, to be sure, an artificially reclaimed island might try to secure an area, but in the meantime, the plan of the island still has to do x, y, and z - whether refitted oil platform, shipyard, decommissioned anti-aircraft platform, or custom-built floating intervention. Under this mode of thinking, the architecture of these islands mediates between a form with geopolitical intent and an empty shell.

But if we are going to consider reclaiming new islands to intervene in the legal frameworks of our existing border conventions, we should perhaps quietly assume that our projects are going to fail. The military might imagine using the re-design of a naturally occurring process in form of a border-altering artificial island as a geopolitical provocation, of course, but what civilian uses could a landscape architect foresee? What other unintended, but perhaps beneficial, by-products might result? The task of the geopolitically inclined landscape architect trying to grapple with large-scale natural phenomena then is to guide this process of post-failure reclamation, curating the ulterior motives and latent potentials for such improbable infrastructure.

### **RADICAL PRAGMATISM**

These systemic approaches to territorial situations point to architecture's capacity for arranging and structuring knowledge, to its power of deliberately turning information on and off at the scale of 1:1.

Figure 4: Flag Rising, Scarborough Shoal (1990)



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Along the lines of the descriptions of the Yolo Buggy, infrastructure is constructed only to act as temporary itinerant structures for border scientists and their surveying machines, functioning as physical measuring markers for territorial growth, as inhabited infrastructure visible for vast distances in the South China Sea. Techniques and choreographies borrowed from landscape architectural design are being applied to actually make nations bigger. In that sense, borders, additively or subtractively altered, can be subject to design processes.

However, facing a moral dilemma, beyond his role to speculate on how a project could and should fail in interesting ways, the landscape architect should seek to maintain some degree of ethical control over the unwieldy forces behind the design act by analyzing the real source of political power and agenda initiating the project. Along the lines of a radically pragmatic thinking, the project must be made inevitable, and built into that inevitability should be a few caveats which might have nothing to do at all with designing a border-altering artificial island but be all about ordinary, morally defensible architectural acts.

Figure 5: Chinese Radar Dome, Subi Reef (2012)

## ENDNOTES

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## **THE ARTICULATE OBJECT**

