

# Taken Out of Context

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**Throughout history, architecture has been influenced by other disciplines and cultures, with countless ideas taken out of context, time and time again. Examples range from the Italian’s influence on French architecture during the sixteenth century to Le Corbusier’s recording, and eventual remixing, of railway sleeping cars that he encountered during his travels abroad.<sup>1</sup> These sparks of inspiring design ideas often emerge when the architect takes a moment to pause, wander and ponder outside of the studio and the discipline. For instance, the Swiss Architect Peter Zumthor finds flair in the work of artists like Joseph Beuys and the Arte Povera group. He states, “what impresses me is the precise and sensuous way they use materials. It seems anchored in an ancient, elemental knowledge about man’s use of materials.”<sup>2</sup> The following text reflects on various examples of creative practices and products that explore the idea of being “taken out of context” in both a physical and disciplinary sense. This conversation stems from my recent experience as an Artist-In-Residence at Baer Art Center in Hofsós, Iceland.**

## **2,963 MILES**

During the summer of 2015, I was honored with the opportunity to develop interdisciplinary relationships and design ideas during a five-week long residency at Baer Art Center in Hofsós, Iceland—a remote village with sheep that outnumber its 200 inhabitants. The Artist-in-Residence Program at Baer fosters an incredibly rich creative retreat by providing architects with the time, space and influential adjacencies that our discipline arguably lacks. When our bodies are taken out of context we experience heightened sensorial stimulation. This leads to a more nuanced understanding of the people, places and spaces that surround us. This more active approach to seeing and sensing results in architecture that is physical, emotional, evocative, environmentally sensitive and culturally relevant. During this formative experience, I absorbed the environment around me—the sights,

smells, sounds and textures that filled the alluring landscape. Being “taken out of context” enabled me to discover newfound interests and ideas about material, form, function, structure, space and creative processes.

## **BOUNTIFUL BYPRODUCTS, FUZZY FRIENDS AND BASALTSCAPES**

Some of my most memorable and formative residency experiences took place during field studies that exposed me to the Icelandic countryside and ways of life. As a designer with a passion for classification, I’ve organized these observations into three categories that range, as I see them, in scale from small, to medium, to large.

### **S (MATERIALS) / BOUNTIFUL BYPRODUCTS**

A thirty-minute car ride southwest of Baer Art Center landed me in Sauðárkrúkur at Atlantic Leather—Iceland’s leading tannery that specializes in manufacturing exotic leather from local commercial byproducts like fish, sheep and horse. This process is rooted in the age-old tradition of sculpting Icelandic shoes with wolffish skins. Locally sourced from Iceland and its neighboring Nordic countries, salmon leather is the company’s most popular product. However Atlantic Leather does process additional fish skins, including cod, perch and wolffish. Other (by)products include longwool sheepskin—double-layered hides with a wildly primitive appearance and excellent insulation properties. The majority of these (by)products are seen as belonging to the fashion world and are used to create belts, bags, shawls and throws, but I left Atlantic Leather wondering how these materials might cross the line and find a purpose in the built environment?

### **M (ARCHITECTURES) / FUZZY FRIENDS**

Before arriving in Iceland, I was aware of the Icelandic Turf House, but was not expecting the allure and charm that these fantastically fuzzy architectures emit. The Turf House dates back to the 9th century when British and Norse settlers brought the tradition to Iceland at the height of the Viking Age. The vernacular building type was derived from the long house where all necessary functions—living quarters, kitchens and stables—were contained in one extended, and sometimes subdivided room. Over time, the shape and configuration of the typical Turf House changed, transforming from a



Figure 1: *Ásbyrgi Canyon* (2015) by Nikole Bouchard in Vatnajökull National Park, Iceland.

single-space to a clustered configuration. Turf Houses were typically built with a timber-frame structure, turf roofs and walls (nearly five feet thick), stone footings and dirt floors—all locally sourced materials in a landscape where more conventional building resources were scarce. Following the settlers' deforestation of Iceland's low birch forests, Turf House timber often came from stripping decommissioned boats or driftwood that washed ashore while the turf was cut from mineral-based marshlands within the region. "A shipwreck was a cause for celebration."<sup>3</sup> Depending on the material composition, Turf House walls required rebuilding every 20-70 years. "In some cases entire walls or a house would be dismantled and rebuilt with new turf, although the stones and timber would most likely be reused."<sup>4</sup>

The spatial configuration, construction details, material properties and multi-functional furniture of the Turf House made for a surprisingly warm and cozy space throughout Iceland's unforgiving seasons. Despite the low-cost and what some would consider comfortable qualities of the Turf House, the vernacular building type is fading fast. The 20th century saw a population shift from rural to urban Iceland and by the 1920's, concrete and corrugated metal became the country's primary building materials. As a result, Turf Houses are a thing of the past, existing only in limited instances where historic preservation efforts are put in place. At the risk of appearing to lament the disappearance of the Turf House, I left Iceland with the desire to look to and learn from these resourceful and responsible building techniques of the past in order to project new typologies for living in the future.

#### L (LANDSCAPES) / BASALT SURFACES

Equally inspiring to me were the magnificent basalt rock formations that are found everywhere throughout the Icelandic landscape. Of specific intrigue is the columnar basalt, a volcanic rock that forms resulting from the rapid cooling of basaltic lava. These rock columns come in all colors, shapes and sizes depending on the cooling rate and mineral make-up of the stone. The influence of these wild basalt stone formations on design is clearly demonstrated in one of Reykjavik's main attractions, the Church of Hallgrímur (1945-1986) by Guðjón Samúelsson. Aside from formal inspiration, basalt

stone can also be used as a building material or heated, extruded and made into stone wool for insulation purposes. These uses fascinate me, but still, I wonder what are the additional ways that these basaltscapes might straddle the line between art, architecture and landscape.

#### REVISITING RUDOFSKY'S ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT ARCHITECTS

These observations led me to revisit and reflect on Bernard Rudofsky's seminal text, *Architecture without Architects* from the 1964 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Rudofsky's survey of primarily communal design throughout 60 countries around the world displayed how this "non-pedigreed architecture gives tangible evidence of more humane, more intelligent ways of living."<sup>5</sup> The exhibition catalogued a number of construction techniques in a variety of climatic conditions where anonymous builders worked with the materials at hand, often in remote landscapes, to craft livable spaces at an affordable cost. Rudofsky proclaims, "there is much to learn from architecture before it became an expert's art. The untutored builders in space and time demonstrate an admirable talent for fitting their buildings into the natural surroundings. Instead of trying to 'conquer' nature, as we do, they welcome the vagaries of climate and the challenge of topography."<sup>6</sup>

#### FINDING INSPIRATION IN ICELAND

Simultaneously, my Icelandic experience resulted in me reflecting on the interdisciplinary design practice of Olafur Eliasson. Eliasson admits that his life-long experiences within the Icelandic landscape have had a massive impact on his creative process—This is where he learned to appreciate the power of defamiliarization and developed astute skills in sensing material, light and weather conditions. "Fundamental to Eliasson's work is the belief, rooted in phenomenology and gestalt psychology, that in changing an individual's perception of their surroundings, art actually changes the world."<sup>7</sup>

Eliasson's controlled use of elemental materials like rocks, water, moss and ice produce experiences where "nature merges with artifice as he often re-contextualizes natural elements to create entirely new circumstances in order to shift the viewer's consciousness and sense of time and place."<sup>8</sup> This form of being "taken out of context" results in a heightened awareness of contemporary social



Figure 2: *Fish Skin Fantasies* (2015) by Nikole Bouchard at Altantic Leather in Sauðárkrókur, Iceland.

and environmental issues. Within his impressive portfolio of work, perhaps the most striking examples of this are *Ice Watch* (2014), *Riverbed* (2014) and *The Weather Project* (2003).

Eliasson's work ranges from photography, to site-specific installations, to architectural interventions and requires collaboration with a variety of professionals including scientists, mathematicians, engineers, artists, architects and city planners. In an interview with *Wired UK*, Eliasson stated, "I'm very curious to access fields in which I am less knowledgeable to see if the creative muscle can translate into action. I am very respectful of the people who are knowledgeable, and I say, 'I don't have an answer to the challenge, but I have a tool—it's call creativity.'"<sup>9</sup>

### REMOTE REFLECTIONS

It's been two years since I spent five weeks of my summer in a remote village of north-central Iceland. Since then, I've had the time and opportunity to step back, digest, decipher and dive deeper into these thoughts. The ideas that stick with me, resonating more and more with each passing day, are ideas that relate to the use of native, and often elemental, materials to explore interdisciplinary design ideas that contemplate critical social, cultural and environmental issues. What follows is a look at three artists whose bold and boundary-breaking work provides further insight and inspiration with regards to how being "taken out of context" can have a powerful impact on designers.

### LOOKING BACK AT JOSEPH BEUYS

Joseph Beuys is an artist that I first learned about in my undergraduate education, but I hadn't thought of him much since then until I returned from my five weeks in the remote Icelandic landscape. Beuys grew up in Kleve, Germany—a Dutch-German town with a rich geological and cultural history. He spent much of his childhood exploring the outdoors, which arguably was "the beginning of a life-long interest in natural science."<sup>10</sup>

Throughout his "life as art" career, Beuys created and maintained a mythical persona. In his 20's, he served in the military as an aircraft radio operator—a job that took him to foreign countries like Italy, Yugoslavia, Poland and Russia. "Beuys later told of having been shot down in the Crimea in 1943 and saved from near death by a group of sympathetic Tatar nomads. This anecdote became the best-known aspect of Beuys' myth."<sup>11</sup> The Tatars had a lasting impact on Beuys, as their use of fat for wound salve and felt for frigid temperature protection would prove to be key material ideas that he would bring back to Germany to work with throughout his entire career.

In 1947, following his military service, Beuys enrolled at Staatliche Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, then upon leaving school in 1951, he embarked on a 10-year period of self-imposed isolation where he continued to explore ideas outside of art, including contemplations on poetry, philosophy, literature, science, folk tradition and wizardry. "The art and literature of German Romanticism grounded Beuys' understanding of a world in which man and nature, spirit and matter, are interdependent and cannot be separated."<sup>12</sup> In 1957, Beuys continued his remote reflections, doing "work in the fields" on the farm of Hans and Franz Joseph van der Grinten—early collectors of Beuys work. Again, being "taken out of context" proved to be a pivotal period in his career, as he stated, "the things inside me had to be totally transplanted; a physical change had to take place in me."<sup>13</sup>

A few years later, Beuys returned to the Kunstakademie to become a professor of sculpture where he would practice and proclaim that "everyone is an artist" and art must be "taken out of context". His 1965 action *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* and subsequent experiment during a visit to America in 1974, *Coyote: I like America and America Likes me*, are prime examples of this. For *Coyote*, he "transformed the René Block Gallery in New York into a habitation for Beuys and a coyote brought from New Mexico, who learned to live together over the course of three days."<sup>14</sup> More than just a shock-inducing displacement, this action explored ideas of human and animal inhabitation of the landscape with an "optimistic vision, presenting the coyote's talent for survival as a symbol of hope and offering the possibility of peaceful cohabitation as a recommendation for the future."<sup>15</sup>

In 1972, with the help of novelist Heinrich Böll, Beuys wrote a manifesto for the Free International School of Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research, which would be established the following year. Eventually the school would have branches in America, England, Yugoslavia, Italy and Germany with the aim to "bring together individuals from different fields and to view all participants both as teachers



Figure 3: *Rock Shop* (2015) by Nikole Bouchard at Baer Art Center in Hofsfós, Iceland.

and students. The aim was to apply to all spheres of work the principle of creativity usually reserved for artists. This concept of creativity was directly linked to that of democracy, which would be practiced in workshops to bring together specialists and non-specialists to address social questions as artistic ones.”<sup>16</sup> Despite the changing context, we can nevertheless see striking continuities between Beuys’ body of work and the desire for a responsible awareness of social, cultural and environmental issues today.

#### **INSIDE THE HEAD OF MICHAEL HEIZER**

The work of Michael Heizer is also “taken out of context” like the provocative pieces of Beuys, but arguably at a much larger scale. The pioneering artist behind notable Land Art masterworks like *Double Negative* (1970), *Adjacent, Against, Upon* (1976) and *The Equals That* (1980) has made a career of removing himself from the traditional space of the art studio, gallery and scene. His work incessantly explores the aesthetic and emotional power of displacement and is often situated in the “bare, wild, inexorable and fierce”<sup>17</sup> wastelands of the American West.

Michael Heizer grew up in Berkeley, California where his father, Robert, was a world-famous archeologist and professor of anthropology at the university. At the age of twelve, Michael accompanied his father on an archeological dig in Mexico with the task of producing field drawings. In addition to his adventures south of the border, Heizer spent summers near Lake Tahoe where he explored lake-bed landscapes and endlessly dug-up Native American artifacts. This quality time with family in foreign landscapes would prove to be formative in the life and career of Heizer later down the road.

In 1965 Heizer moved to New York City where the thought was beginning to percolate, as in the case of Beuys, that “art needed to be liberated from the constraints of galleries and museums.”<sup>18</sup> In 1967, the self-appointed spokesman of this movement, Robert Smithson, posited that “pavements, holes, trenches, mounds, heaps, paths, ditches, roads, terraces, etc., all have an aesthetic potential.”<sup>19</sup> In his eyes, bulldozers and backhoes could be used as tools for large-scale Land Art sculptures. Despite Heizer’s disdain for Smithson, whom he felt was stealing his identity, one could argue that they shared a passion for working with the immediate material context to sculpt land as art.



Figure 4: *Fish Skin Fantasies* (2015) by Nikole Bouchard at Altantic Leather in Sauðárkrókur, Iceland.

Heizer has spent much of the past 50 years working in solitude on his ranch in Garden Valley, Nevada surrounded by 7,400 acres of National Monument, the Nellis Airforce Base, Yucca Mountain and Area 51. Here, he's working on a life-long project that began in 1972, City, a monumental mile-and-a-half long sculpture inspired by pre-Colombian architectonic work and made of sand, rock and concrete that was mined and mixed on site. For Heizer, this was the only way to conceivably construct City, given that the closest town—Hiko, Nevada with a population of only 120—is over two hours away by car.

Constructed with the valley's limestone, dolomite, sandstone and basalt that was once submerged under the Pacific Ocean, City is "at its most basic, a mining project—pits, mounds, and the ramps that connect them. Intuitively, it is a zero-sum proposition: each negative volume is balanced by a positive."<sup>20</sup> In a 2016 conversation with The New Yorker writer Dana Goodyear, Heizer said "my work, if it's good, it's gotta be about risk. If it isn't, it's got no flavor, no salt."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Heizer satisfies his desire and need for drama, pain and suffering in the forbiddingly desolate space of the Nevada desert. The process is raw and the outcome is radical.

#### EXPLORING AUTONOMY WITH ANDREA ZITTEL

Lastly, I'd like to reflect upon the work of Andrea Zittel, a 52-year-old artist whose anti-consumerist work blatantly crosses the boundaries between art, architecture and landscape to better understand human nature. Zittel professes, "I believe that you need to have only one garment per season, and you don't need any dishes other than bowls, and a 30-inch-wide bed is the perfect width—anything more just takes up more room and is unnecessary."<sup>22</sup> Her indistinguishable work and life examines our daily living rituals through the contemplation and creation of food, clothing, furniture and shelter in the remote Mojave Desert landscape, 140 miles east of Los Angeles, California. Here, in "the American Desert...the house of light and color...everything...is colored, even the air...yellow, saffron-colored, rose-colored, azure, steel, blue, ruby-red, topaz, lilac, and violet air."<sup>23</sup>

Zittel reminisces, "when I first moved to New York, I'd walk out my door and two blocks away I'd have this anxiety attack and go back home."<sup>24</sup> Like the aforementioned artists Joseph Beuys and Michael Heizer, Andrea Zittel physically removed herself from the center of the art world when she moved outside of Joshua Tree National Park nearly 18 years ago to establish her living experiment, A-Z West. She's accompanied at her compound by her 13-year-old son along with her pack of rescue dogs, cats, chickens and pigeons. She believes, like Beuys and Iceland's Turf House dwellers, that "living with animals connects you to nature in an invaluable way."<sup>25</sup>

Zittel designs all aspects of her life, ranging in scale from the clothing she wears, to the spaces she lives in, to the landscapes she explores. For more than 20 years she has created own personal "uniforms"—utilitarian garments tailored specifically to her body and the seasons which she wears for several months at a time until they are no longer practical. Her "uniforms" are "a reaction against excess and designer

clothing."<sup>26</sup> She designs and makes these garments on her 35-acre A-Z West—a type of tabula rasa landscape where she has situated her home, 12 Wagon Stations, a communal outdoor kitchen, open air showers and composting toilets to create a compound where visitors can stay for free in exchange for one hour of site maintenance each morning of their visit. Zittel uses the money she makes from selling sculptures, installations and living units to cover the operating costs of A-Z West.

Zittel first began to explore these "taken out of context" and anti-consumerist outlooks in the 1990s with her series of A-Z Living Units, A-Z Escape Vehicles, A-Z Cellular Compartments, A-Z Deserted Islands and A-Z Pocket Property. Her most recent exploration of this theme are the Wagon Stations—A series of tiny living capsules that contain the basic services to provide a comfortable living space within the wilderness. The seven-foot long and four-foot wide Wagon Stations are sprinkled about Zittel's A-Z West property, providing opportunities for others to pause, wonder and ponder. At the core, Zittel is "interested in making structures that, when you're inside of them, shift or alter your perception of the surrounding landscape."<sup>27</sup>

Like Beuys, Zittel has also embarked on a project that fosters intellectual exchanges and creative collaborations between individuals across diverse disciplines. In 2002 Zittel founded High Desert Test Sites (HDTS) along with co-founders Andy Stillpass, John Connelly, Lisa Anne Auerbach and Shaun Caley Regen. This non-profit organization "supports intimate and immersive experiences and exchanges between artists, critical thinkers, and general audiences – challenging all to expand their definition of art to take on new areas of relevancy."<sup>28</sup> If she wasn't an artist, Zittel says, "I think I'd be a psychologist. I want to understand human nature and unpack human happiness."<sup>29</sup>

#### IN CLOSING

So what does this mean for our discipline? I'd like to think that being "taken out of context" and learning from others that have done so as well, can have a positive impact on the way we see, sense and sculpt our spaces and experiences. The work discussed in this paper promotes a sense of responsible resourcefulness and an enthusiasm to engage with individuals outside of one's discipline. We can find an appreciation for and exploration of these types of practices today. Take for example the small-scale recycled material products, Hair Highway and Sea Chair, by the London-based Studio Swine. Or MOS Architects' medium-scale installation, Afterparty, which produces microclimates by reinterpreting primitive buildings types and materials. And the large-scale post-industrial promise of T+E+A+M's Detroit Reassembly Plant which reimagines the city as a resource replete where rubble, plastics and post-consumer products are ripe with potential.

Further explorations of these types of ideas can be seen in the current Designing Material Innovation exhibition in the Back Lot at the California College of the Arts. Curated by Jonathan Massey, this exhibition brings together Aptum Architecture, CCA Digital Craft Lab,

T+E+A+M and Matter Design to present five full-scale prototypes that explore form and material with fresh perspectives that learn from the past to reinvent for the future. Massey states that these projects “emerged from a collaboration across fields of knowledge and expertise as architects partnered with engineers and fabricators, chemists and biologists, as well as farmers and students, historians and waste managers.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, an appreciation for anti-disciplinary design is demonstrated in Ensamble Studio’s Tippet Rise Art Center Structures—a series of unpredictable architectures constructed with pre-existing, natural materials that emerge from, and eventually return to, the Montana landscape. Ensamble Studio sees “the landscape as palette of material resources, artistic expression and mechanical strength” to produce brutally beautiful structures bring together artists, architects, environmentalists and adventurers. Undoubtedly, this paper presents only a small collection of the “taken out of context” creative approaches and practices that we can look to and learn from. It’s for certain a start, but by no means an end.

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Figure 5: *Ásbyrgi Canyon* (2015) by Nikole Bouchard in Vatnajökull National Park, Iceland.