

Between oaks and ashes
Brigitte Jurack

*Rummaging- unearthing - turning upside down – uncovering - prodding – mining -
moving earth - manipulating surfaces - scarring - getting deeper - finding -
discovering - getting through - drilling – interrupting -*

*Layers – ground – earth - rock - surfaces – underlay - overlay – resistance -
opportunity – manipulation – stewardship – interruption – caves – underland -
extraction-deposition*

Imagine yourself on the Texas Christian University (TCU) campus two million years ago.¹ You would be standing on the supercontinent known as Pangaea. Alone on the vast continuous landmass as it began to break apart, you would have not sensed the slow movement of the rocks below.

Now, imagine yourself in the middle of the last century as the Second World War ravaged through Europe and the rest of the world and explosions in Pearl Harbour and Hiroshima caused unspeakable damage. Standing on the TCU campus, you would have been surrounded by a handful of impressive Neoclassical buildings, such as the Library, and a vast open space that was interspersed with rows of single floor barrack-style teaching rooms, surrounded by fields, and barely a mature tree in sight.

You would have been on the edge of town with a streetcar connecting you to 'downtown.' Overall, it would have been pretty sparse or, depending on one's viewpoint, a so-called 'blank canvas.'² Between 1939-48 TCU embarked on a building and landscaping programme which still dominates today's campus experience despite subsequent building booms and we ought to thank those landscape architects for the 500 live oaks and elm trees planted in 1948 and under whose shadows we now walk and sit.³

Vast areas of 'prairie' green belt land was dug up, earth moved, turned around and built on and landscaped. The earth below your feet was re-shaped, remodelled, appropriated and sub-ordinated to the purpose of building a University that would be not only fit for purpose, but of a high aesthetic standard with the explicit belief that *beauty* is implicit and complicit to the education of students to become active and ethical future citizens and leaders.

Look around you. There is no need to dig very deep to unearth the multitude of architectural and ideological influences that drove the building plans from the late

1940s. I have taken students on walking tours across UK university campuses since their buildings and layouts are not only testament to architectural trends but to a *distinct way of thinking* through the medium of architecture. As such, “Architecture is a means of philosophising about the world and human existence through the material act of constructing. Architecture develops existential and lived metaphors through space, structure, matter, gravity and light.”⁴

Symmetria (Engl.: Symmetry)

To help understand these *distinct ways of thinking* that underpin TCU’s building programme, the illustrated booklet *Texas Christian University Building Programme* (1948), with introduction by President Dr M. E. Sadler, provides great insights.

Hand-drawn illustrations in pencil, black and sepia ink visualise individual buildings and the overall layout of the campus. These drawings are the first embodiment of the imagined and subsequently realised programme of digging and building. All illustrations include large mature trees, lawns and pedestrian walkways, clearly influenced and informed by English landscape garden design⁵, the world-famous worker model villages such as Saltaire (Yorkshire)⁶, Port Sunlight (Merseyside) and Bournville (Birmingham) and garden cities⁷ such as Hampstead Garden City (London) and Letchworth Garden City (Hertfordshire).

Trees disrupt and soften the stark austere symmetry of the buildings, all of which are steeped in the Neoclassical tradition, including the appropriation of visual cues of Ancient Greece, including columns, wide staircases, tympanons, proportions and roof constructions. These elements reflect metaphors of an ordered learning that locates its origins in the classical period of Ancient Greece; the period of Pericles (495-429 BC) statesman and visionary, who pulled together artists, thinkers and all available talent, making Athens the political and cultural focus of Greece and creating a legacy of building programmes and sculptures that include the Acropolis, the Agora and the sculptures of Praxiteles of Athens. Clean lines, symmetry, order, squares, theatres, libraries and gymnasia, dormitories and lecture halls all take their architectural cues from the ‘cradle’ of Western Democracy, Philosophy and Education, Athens and Ancient Greece.⁸

Standing in the shadows of one of the 500 trees planted in 1948 it seems that the commissioners and architects of the 1940s imagined their building programme had gone back in time to rely on pre-modern metaphors of the world as guiding principle for their constructions, rather than embracing the modernism of downtown Fort Worth with its art deco masterpieces in chrome, terrazzo and cast stone. They chose solid stones instead of fancy chrome and steel, Terracotta tiled roofs instead of floating concrete, and craftsmanship instead of factory fabrication. This appropriation

of pre-modern architectural metaphors has continued in more recent 21st century additions to the campus using a kind of Postmodern Neoclassic mannerism.⁹

Here you are standing under this fabulous oak once again. Thank you for planting it 74 years ago. Here you are living, working, studying and researching in buildings that are in most part embodied metaphors of a lengthy temporal and geographical past. Whilst the roots of the oak reach into the prairie of the distant past, its canopy rinses the air of its pollutant.

Quercus Virginiana (Engl.: Southern Live Oak) and **Quercus Robur** (Engl.: English Oak)

Let us dig a little deeper and a little wider. These 500 live oaks (*Quercus Virginiana*) and elms were planted in 1946 and the informative booklet speaks about them in the chapter *Beautification of the campus*. These trees are planted just weeks after the whole of Europe lies in Ashes.

Oak trees are not only a botanical species but of cultural significance. "Oak trees have a life-span of 800 years, growing a consciousness many generations longer than men."¹⁰ The oak tree has symbolic roots in ancient Europe, linking it with history and with an often collective memory ranging from the oldest dug out boats from the Mesolithic period 8000-4200 and the Stone Age (8000-2000 BC), carved statues carved ships, buildings, furniture, songs and poems passed on from generation to generation.¹¹

Oak trees are ancient and their durable dense woodgrain wrapped up with the history of humanity. Planting an oak tree is planting a future that is connected to the deep past. Every planted oak has a future life-span that will make the tree part of a yet unknown history.¹² Not just trees, not just beautiful in an aesthetic sense, but living connectors to the past and future, between earth and sky (heaven) and vital in providing clean air, shadow and living space for countless species. In today's crisis of rising temperatures, depleting resources, forest fires and de-forestation these 500 planted trees gain another layer of meaning. Again, we ought to thank those landscape architects of 1948 for improving our air.

In 1982, the German artist Joseph Beuys proposed for the international exhibition Documenta 7 to plant *7000 oaks for Kassel*.¹³ With *7000 oaks*, Beuys wanted to set an example of how we as citizens can participate in the improvement of the urban environment and of our living spaces. Whilst acutely aware that a change in thinking was (and is) required to re-connect economy, democracy, culture and nature, Beuys was the leading artist of the second half of the 20th century who created artworks that made tangible and experiential an existentialistic and integrated relationship between humankind and the natural environment. Connecting, almost intuitively, to ancient and 'aboriginal' tacit knowledge and combining this with a deep practical knowledge

of natural forms, growth patterns and underlying principles in the animal and plant life, Beuys reminded his students and audiences that we are part of nature and not its opposite and that it is our responsibility to help a planet that is losing the power of self-regeneration. ¹⁴

Trained as a traditional carver, Beuys articulated his ideas “through the inherent medium and artistic logic of a particular art form in a dialectical process with its tradition.”¹⁵ Rather than carving seasoned trees into representative figurative forms (the tradition so to speak) he transgressed from the traditional field of art, creating forms and images that impacted on the lives of real people on a city-wide scale, dramatically changing the roadsides, sidewalks, grass verges and air quality of Kassel in 1982. Similarly, across the USA artists including Robert Smithson, Mary Miss, Nancy Holt, Agnes Dene, Alice Aycock, Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison turned to what we would now term ‘ecological issues.’ Whilst driven by a diverse range of motives, including reacting to an artefact obsessed art market, land, earth, the scarred and abused ground, water, weather, atmosphere and pollution became materials for transformation for these artists and their community collaborators.

Since Smithson’s early attempt to persuade mining companies to work with artists on land-rehabilitation of abandoned surface mines and gravel pits, a small number of artists found ways to convince industries, city administrators and communities to imagine and create new visions for post-industrial wasteland.¹⁶ Moving large amounts of soil to create terraces, mounds and underground chambers, Miss and Holt created works, that were informed by ancient cultures whose life rhythms were more aligned to those of nature, thus enabling visitors to experience celestial phenomena within 20th century earth works.

PERITIA (Engl.: expertise, experience, skill)

The lived experience of the TCU landscape architects of 1946 was informed by embodied memory and underpinning ideology of English landscape garden design, Victorian model villages, Edwardian garden cities and Frederick Law Olmstead’s Central Park, New York.¹⁷ Despite their differences in design, they all involve some form of major earthwork such as the drenching of land, rerouting of rivers or streams, moving large volumes of earth and appropriating site sedimentation in order to create a three-dimensional image of gently rolling hills and clusters of settlements, punctuated by trees and evergreens, cottage gardens (vegetable and flowers), a pig, sheep and chicken. The late Victorian model villages in the UK have gained cult status within Architectural schools and scholarship across the globe, financed and built by philanthropic and religious industrialists that envisaged slum-free healthy and sustainable living conditions for their workers.¹⁸ The design of these villages harked back to the layout and infrastructure of medieval English villages and re-created them from scratch into a suburban context. Toyota’s recent announcement to build a 21st century model town *Woven City* on the former Toyota factory site situates itself

within this reformist context ¹⁹. Here the commissioned Danish architect Bjarke Ingles imagines with pen and paper, albeit digital, a green, sustainable and completely technologically enhanced and integrated city for 2,000 families.

IMAGINOR et OPINOR

It is late in the year 2020 and we are still standing under the 74-year old oak tree that had been left to the bees and birds during a 6-month pandemic lock-down and remained somewhat sheltered from the downtown Fort Worth summer protests. It is time to use pencil, ink and paper, to imagine the TCU grounds and campus of the not so distant future.

As I sit remotely in my studio, a former Victorian bakery built in 1900, I study photographs, maps and google views of the campus. Downloaded from the Library's archive I mentally walk between the buildings, taking delight in the green and immaculate lawns, quietly noting how clean and ordered everything is, how beautiful and well attended. My body remembers waiting at the bus stop, being drenched in unexpected rain and utterly blown away by Louis Kahn's architecture at the Kimbell Art Museum (1966-72) and overwhelmed by the amount of concrete used to create the Fort Worth Watergardens (1974), an ode to the gentle and torrent sounds and textures of water. My imagination is ignited by the ideals of Kahn, the attention to detail, the gentle touch of light as it hushes across the stone surface; a profound beauty that nourishes the soul.

As I begin to trace the photographs from the libraries archive, my hands as much as my mind begin to ask questions, heightened by the experience of pandemic lockdown, forest fires and a global and local economy in crisis. In short, questions that go to the heart of how we re-engage in profoundly ethical and cultural change. Bent over the tracing paper that dulls the photograph underneath, it is obvious to me that "we do not live in an objective world of matter and facts, as commonplace naïve realism assumes."²⁰

I know that things, the status quo, rules, nature, myself and others have the capacity to change. Change inspired and catalysed by an optimistic imagination. A line in a drawing does not only change the composition, but is the engine of a thought propelled forward by the hand moving across the paper. Pallasmaa writes that our characteristically human mode of existence takes place in the world of possibilities, moulded by our fantasy and imagination.²¹ As I continue to draw, a semi-chaotic memory bank seems to open up somewhere between the inside of my skull and the hand. Images tumble out, past experiences take hold, embodied memories are pushing forward and pour out from all sorts of directions.

Runner beans - Welsh mountains – rocks – allotments - solar cells - 7000 Oaks - walking in the shade of evergreen trees in Guangzhou - Japanese gardens - English Gardens - Ancient woodlands - factory farming - air conditioning – digging - radio news asking people to stay

*outdoors - 'socially distancing' – bees – honey - rubbish, Herman de Vries - community gardens in Detroit and Chicago - American lawns – concrete - wind farms - water shortage - led poisoning of water - making a skep - dyeing with natural ingredients - picking your own fruit - knowing animals and plants by name - ash die back - landscape architecture - Land Art – gardening – caring – stewardship – shepherds – Genesis - Dorothee Sölle's Credo.*²²

Drawing, like writing, is a rather slow process: observing, channelling, processing, translating and above all, touching.²³ I touch the skin of the world with the same sense of wonder as a child scratches the surface of a frosted window.²⁴ The tracing paper, like frosted glass or a highlighter pen, is a device for thinking. What should a 21st century university and campus look like? One that inspires, teaches and educates “creative and constructive citizens and leaders for our democracy?”²⁵

If we accept that our surroundings affect our understanding of the local and the wider world, how could this surrounding be changed in such a way that learning and living become sustainable and experiential? How can we regain some of the physical and embodied learning which just a few students enrolled in Drama, the Arts, Medicine and Sports still experience? How can we teach and learn in a circular way and via bringing the local into the curriculum in order to understand world experientially and ethically?

FOSSURA (Engl.: digging)

I am proposing to dig up the lawns, switch off the air conditioning, build with the local climate in mind, construct wind mills, solar cells and bio-reactors, create grey water systems and water cleaning reed beds, grow materials such as sheep wool, flax, hemp and cotton for our cloths and our bodies, vegetables, fruit and mushrooms. We could observe plants and know them by name, grow for pollinators and harvest honey. We can plant herb and medicinal gardens, grow plants used for dyeing fabric, wool and for making paint. We shall make compost, assemble in outdoor spaces, work and harvest the vegetable plots and kill the chickens we wish to eat.

American artist Patricia Johanson writes in 1969 that a change in how we deal with the planet's natural resources is urgently required.²⁶ Her *Habitat-Gardens* have become outstanding models for maintenance and recreation of biodiversity.²⁷

My drawings for buildings and grounds at the TCU campus imagine a place where lost practical and intellectual knowledge and understanding about the world of plants, from invisible mushroom to forests, can be unearthed and re-learned as the home of our existence and our wellbeing. Digging up the lawn is the beginning of gaining embodied knowledge of nature and culture. We ought to know the plants and other living organisms by name and we ought to know chickens, cattle and pigs by name since it is those who we know by name we care for and protect.²⁸

Do you know how much sheep fleece you need to knit a jumper? How many blossoms and bees are needed for a jar of honey? How much flax for a yard of linen?

As ethical citizens and leaders we ought to know these things, with our hands, minds and bodies.

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¹ This sentence is an adaptation of the first sentence in Robert Smithson's famous essay, *Fredrick Law Olmsted and the dialectical landscape*. Robert Smithson, p117

² A 'blank canvas' is of course a fallacy, not only in relation to Robert Smithson's reminder of the age of the ground we are standing on, but also in relation to cultural use of the land by those people, who lived on and from this land before the arrival of the European settlers in the USA.

³ Accidentally introduced in the 1960's Dutch elm disease caused the near extinction of several species of elm (trees in the *Ulmus* genus). It is caused by two related fungi, *Ophiostoma novo-ulmi* and *Ophiostoma ulmi*, although almost all cases are now caused by *O. novo-ulmi*. The fungus is spread from tree to tree by elm bark beetles. It has killed tens of millions of elm trees in the United Kingdom and in all other parts of the world. It would be useful to know, if the Elms of 1946 are still in healthy conditions on the TCU campus, or if the diseased trees have been replaced by live oaks.

⁴ Pallasmaa, Juhani, *The Thinking Hand*, ADPrimers, Wiley, 2009, pg. 114

⁵ The relationship between mankind and garden/gardening has long historical and cultural roots. Genesis's garden (Eden, Paradise) is a garden to be worked in and cared for to nourish mankind. It was to be cultivated just like the hanging gardens of ancient Persia, gardens bearing the fruit for nourishment. The Enlightenment

defined art and nature anew. It considered nature, which always expressed itself in irregular forms and serpentine lines, superior to art, which is said to use geometry and straight lines (Hogarth).” From this perspective the position of the garden remained somewhat between nature and art. It is the introduction of the so-called English garden by William Gilpin and Capability Brown, which represented a 180 degree turn from the geometry of French gardens. From now on, “the beauty of nature consisted in creating an open landscape, free of boundaries, with meadows, hills and valleys, in which rivers and creeks could run freely.” Bijvoet, 267

6 In the 5th to 4th century BCE Athens had an extraordinary system of government: democracy. Under this system, all male citizens had equal political rights, freedom of speech, and the opportunity to participate directly in the political arena. However, only male citizens who were 18 years or over could speak and vote in the assembly, whilst professional positions such as magistrates and jurors were limited to those over 30 years of age. Women, slaves, and resident foreigners (*metoikoi*) were excluded from the political process. Education of Athenian boys was well organised, all other groups of society were excluded from education or a political voice.

⁷ Whilst most buildings at T.C.U. follow the Neoclassic mannerism, a few buildings stand out for their architectural innovation, most notably the Sid W Richardson Physical Science building (1970) build by Paul Rudolph, <https://www.paulrudolphheritagefoundation.org/196603-sid-richardson-physical-sciences-building>; the Schollmaier Arena façade and the Amon G Carter stadium Art Deco entrance and the Moudy Buildings by architect Kecin Roche winning the Pritzker prize for their design. <https://www.fwweekly.com/2019/03/13/r-i-p-kevin-roche/>

¹⁰ Bijvoet, p 249

¹¹ These log boats are carved out of a single tree trunk. The oldest log boat in Western Europe was found in Linum (Germany) and has been carbon dated to 5000 BC. It is on display in the Neue Museum, Berlin <https://www.smb.museum/nachrichten/detail/linumer-einbaum-das-aelteste-wassergefaehrt-brandenburgs-zieht-ins-neue-museum/>

¹² Bijvoet, p 249

¹³ The entire project of planting 7000 oak trees in the town of Kassel in Germany with a population of about 202.000 people was financed through donations. “A special ‘7000 oaks office’ was set up, which developed into a veritable organization consisting of experts, gardeners and administrators. When Beuys died, the number of planted trees had reached 5.5000: oak, ash, lime, plane, maple and chestnut trees. On the opening day of the 8th of Documenta, June, 1987, the 7000th oak tree was planted by his son Wenzel in the presence of Eva Beuys.” Ibid 248

¹⁴ Ibid. 262

¹⁵ Pallasmaa, p 115

¹⁶ *Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture*, Seattle Art Museum, 1979

¹⁷ Robert Smithson notes that the ‘picturesque’, as conceived by English Landscape designers Price and Gilpin was not static, but dynamic and a result of chance and change in the material order of nature.

¹⁸ I live 5 minutes away from Port Sunlight, the world-famous worker’s village for the soap factory Lever. Whilst the UK workers for the factory were settled in this newly build model village, manufacturing fine soaps from pure palm oil, the workers on the Palm oil plantations in Belgium Congo were still treated like slaves and worked under the most inhumane conditions.

¹⁹ Toyota Woven City www.woven-city-global

²⁰ Pallasmaa 127

²¹ Ibid 127

²² Sölle was one of the leading radical Theologians, working in the USA and Germany. Her credo “I believe in God who created the world not ready made...” (1968) has become exceptionally poignant for the COVID19 pandemic.

²³ Until the 20th century, all Academy students spend the first year of their studies drawing. When on a teaching exchange to GAFA (Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts), I learned, that students studying traditional Chinese landscape ink painting, spend the first two years of their studies tracing old masters and the occasional tree on the campus grounds. Here learning how to draw is akin on learning to play an instrument: tuning eye, hand, mind to a level where they work together intuitively.

²⁴ Finnish painter Juhana Blomsted, echoing Merleau-Ponty's argument, that painter or poet express their encounter with the world. Kearney, R., 'Maurice Merleau-Ponty', *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1994, p 82.

²⁵ Source: TCU building programme leaflet and current TCU website: It is our mission "to educate individuals to think and act as ethical leaders and responsible citizens in the global community"

<https://www.tcu.edu/about/mission-history.php#mvv>

²⁶ American artist Patricia Johanson wrote in 1969(!) for *House and Garden* (unpublished) "It would seem that the time has come for the creation of a vast new *public* landscape. (...) By interweaving man's construct with the profuse phenomena of nature- water, geological formations, plants and animals in their natural habitats- it might be possible to shift away from a world oriented to power and profit, to a world oriented to life." Quoted from Barbara C. Matilsky, *Fragile Ecologies, Contemporary Artists' Interpretations and Solutions*, Rizzoli/Queens Museum of Art, NY, 1992, p40

²⁷ Bijvoet, p191

²⁸ Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, 1962 highlighted the devastation caused by DDT on the natural environment and human health. The book, together with activists and scientific evidence lead eventually to some change. L.A. based artist Jacki Apple's *The Garden Planet Revisited* (performed in 1982) has lost nothing of its actuality and intensity today. Apple's piece focusses on the self-destructive power of Western civilization, with its 'advanced' technology and our inability to listen to the warnings of this planet. Like Carson, her message is clear: a continuation of a non-ecological approach will make the whole world 'shift'; a shift that has become evident in 2020. Bijvoet, p217