CRITICAL PRACTICE IN AN AGE OF COMPLEXITY - AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CRITIQUE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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• Abstract (300 words):
This paper introduces the idea of a Soft City and recasts Harvard Forest as a case study for Soft City design. A Soft City allows large-scale ecology and the biological decomposition of materials to be a prominent consideration in the language of highly technological urban design. Although mostly studied through the lens of the natural sciences, Harvard Forest fits comfortably within the disciplines of architecture, landscape architecture, and urbanism and can even be understood as a progressive model for spread-out suburban development in North America.

Harvard Forest exists as 3,750 acres of managed woodlands, wetlands, and farm fields in western Massachusetts and serves as an outdoor classroom for Harvard University. Dense patches of trees at Harvard Forest belie its urban and highly technological character; it is a constructed landscape where goods, information, knowledge, people, vehicles, and animals move by transportation and communication networks made of wireless signals and stones. This spread-out urbanism of signals and stones is called "forest." Its underlying
matrix, its surrounding substance and foundation, is a continuing and resilient ecosystem of trees, understory vegetation, wildlife, soils and microorganisms, terrestrial and atmospheric elements, and water cycling.

By meticulously recording the performance of the forest for half a century, Harvard Forest scientists have provided a ground-breaking design specification sheet for the creation of urbanism where the base condition is living building materials. Soft City sub-urbanism, as discussed in this paper through the lens of Harvard Forest, positions the forest as an architectural building block in the creation of contemporary human habitat and in doing so draws on a highly effective, long-term infrastructural strategy for balancing carbon cycles and maintaining air quality in urban areas. In the Soft City, the forest is a multivalent urban land-use type. It is something other than the periphery of development or an obstacle that needs to be cleared in order for suburban development to occur.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Jana VanderGoot is an Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Maryland School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. She holds a Master of Landscape Architecture degree from Harvard University Graduate School of Design, a Master of Architecture from University of Virginia, and a Bachelor of Architecture from University of Notre Dame. Jana is a registered architect, founding partner of VanderGoot Ezban Studio, and 2011 recipient of the Rieger Graham Prize, ICAA affiliated fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. Her recent book Architecture and the Forest Aesthetic: A New Look at Design and Resilient Urbanism was published by Routledge Press in December of 2017.