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

• Paper / Proposal Title:
Limitless Capacity: Western Water and Landscape

• Format:
Written paper / verbal presentation

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• Abstract (300 words):
As populations continue to shift to cities, people and power are concentrated. The federal government is shrinking and traditionally federal concerns like infrastructure continue to crumble, especially in urban conditions. Concentrated power is wielded through physical structures and the political realm simultaneously, as reinforcing practices creating identity and reality. “As the varied history of critical theory has taught us, we cannot think critically without exposing the power relations through which urban forms and processes like gentrification or privatization are made—or attempted to be made—‘normalised’, ‘inevitable’ and ‘universal’ (McFarlane 2011). Landscape architecture has the capacity to normalize and create new readings and operations of the city. Political ecology enriches the descriptive capacity of landscape architectural theory, provides new avenues for landscape research, and forces a reckoning with the aims of landscape architecture.
Centralized water infrastructure, especially in the American West, pits the urban versus the rural, and creates a politicized hydrology that is prevalent in the residential front lawn and garden, as well as the civic realm. In cities, individual agency is minimized and both perception and accessibility of water are tightly controlled. The ontological implication of western water control is that large scale infrastructural and landscape practices obscure the reality of water availability. Additionally, that control if often unseen and poorly understood. Through a study of the Colorado Compact based in theories of infrastructural urbanism, assemblage and political ecology, technocratic power structures and misaligned incentives are explored. As Gandy (2014) notes, “the politics of identity... are an inescapable and important aspect of dealing with the urban built environment”. This paper questions how and why landscape architecture, which creates so much urban identity, is often a power reinforcing structure.


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

Kathleen Kambic is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of New Mexico. She is also an affiliate of the Water Resources Program at UNM and the Center of the American West at CU Boulder. Kathleen Kambic earned her MLA, MArch, and BSArch degrees from the University of Virginia. She has worked at Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects in Charlottesville, VA and EDAW/AECOM in Denver, CO. Kathleen has also previously taught at the University of Colorado Boulder Program in Environmental Design. Her research interests include western water infrastructure, marginalized urban space, political ecology and landscape theory. In the last 10 years, Kathleen has taught seminars and design studios focused on water infrastructure. She has knowledge of western water laws and infrastructure, and contemporary best management practices for water control. Kathleen has most recently contributed a chapter entitled "Urban Water Visibility in Los Angeles: legibility and access for all" to the edited volume, A Political Ecology of Women, Water, and Global Environmental Change (2015). She has also recently placed in two design competitions, “What’s up Paris?” (1st place, 2017) and “Hornachuelos Downtown Reactivation” (3rd place, 2016) on an interdisciplinary team of UNM faculty.