NEW AMERICAN WILDERNESS

LARCH 7890/8990/4780H NEW AMERICAN WILDERNESS
8:00-10:20 AM in Knowlton 258
Autumn 2013
Knowlton School of Architecture
Ohio State University

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Office Hours: Tuesday 9-11, 2-4

DESCRIPTION

Wilderness is one of the longest-enduring and most-influential of American ideas about landscape, informing attitudes towards and shaping practices involved in the development, cultivation, exploitation, restoration and preservation of American landscapes. This course explores a revised definition of wilderness—the “New American Wilderness”—through landscape research.

In contrast to traditional American definitions of wilderness, which focus on the absence of human influence, this revised definition focuses on the failure of human control, opening up broad new territories for consideration through the lens of wilderness, perhaps most notably including large-scale territories which are undergoing landscape change via the unintentional effects of human activities such as the manipulation of biogeochemical cycles, fire suppression, or the global trade in exotic species. Using landscape research methodologies including historical study, geospatial analytics, visualization, and writing, we will explore and explicate a set of territories within the Great Lakes Basin which can be understood as examples of the New American Wilderness, aiming both to understand these territories as landscapes and to utilize them as experimental test-cases to refine our revised definition of wilderness.
BACKGROUND
The 1964 Federal Wilderness Act provides a definition of wilderness which lays out clearly the traditional American understanding of wilderness territories:

“A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.”

This is the understanding of wilderness that has been propagated by many of the most important American thinkers about nature, landscape, and the relationship of those categories to human activities, such as Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold: that wilderness is most wild which has seen the least change as a result of human intervention. This concept’s growth and success was propelled, as William Cronon convincingly argues in *Uncommon Ground*, by two other concepts which are deeply rooted in American history, politics, and arts: the romantic notion of the sublime, under which encounters with forces beyond human control vivify the human spirit, and the ideology of the frontier, under which the exemplary aspects of the American character, contradictorily including both rugged individualism and communitarianism, are provoked and produced by contact with the wild and dangerous frontier.

This understanding of wilderness, often referred to by historians as the “wilderness ideal”, has guided the development of federal agencies like the National Park Service, practices of wilderness preservation and conservation ecology, the advocacy efforts of environmentalist organizations like the Sierra Club, and the resource management of entities like the US Forest Service. It can also be seen informing the work of landscape architects and territorial planners.
like Ian McHarg and Benton MacKaye, embodied in design efforts that aim to preserve wild lands against the effects of urbanization. To quote Benton MacKaye reflecting, in *The New Exploration*, on Abraham Lincoln’s description of Niagara Falls:

“The Primeval [is] the environment of life’s sources... the common living-ground of all mankind... Here is America of the ‘indefinite past’, the America which ‘was roaring here’ when ‘Columbus first sought this continent’. Of course every other nation also has been founded ultimately upon some primeval base. But we are close to ours. Primeval America is well within the memory of men now living, and in spots it still hangs on... Our job now, in the new exploration, is to visualize the thing—the hunting ground itself as a land in which to live, the actual restoration of the primeval American environment.”

However, recent scientific advances, new theories of urbanization, and the growing awareness of the scale of human influence on the global environment often captured by the geological catchphrase “the Anthropocene” have made a continued belief in pristine and untrammeled wilderness untenable. If wilderness requires the exclusion of significant human influence, then wilderness is nearly extinct. Moreover, we now know, through archaeological evidence and the work of ecological historians, that the moment of apparent wilderness that confronted European settlers as they raced westward in the Americas was a historical aberration, the result of a sudden rewilding that followed the calamitous collapse of native societies exposed to Eurasian infectious diseases.

Revisiting the definition of wilderness provides an opportunity to build upon a more expansive notion of wildness. This is an opportunity to come to terms with the tendency of the collective processes of urbanization—including, in particular, its expansive impacts on sparsely-settled hinterlands via infrastructural manipulations, agriculture, silviculture, and resource extraction, all of which alter material movements, species compositions, biogeochemical cycles, and even geologic conditions—to escape rational human control and planning, to fracture, glitch, and crash in ways that produce new wildlands, instigated by human activity but beyond control.

Within these New American Wildernesses lie possible new encounters with the wild, landscapes in which to experience a sublime that is neither the Romantic sublime of natural forces nor the technological sublime of awe-inducing acts of control (as described in David Nye’s *American Technological Sublime*), but a post-natural and post-technological sublime, a sublime of feedbacks, spillovers, crashes, and bifurcations—a sublime for the Anthropocene. Just as significantly, within these territories there are opportunities to engage with the forces that the aggregate activities of human settlement have unleashed, which are producing many of the key contemporary environmental crises, such as the damage caused to ecologies and hydrologies by resource extraction, the toxic territories generated by large-scale industrial and logistical activity, or the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services to the combined pressures of climate change, global species migration, and nutrient imbalances. While this seminar will not engage the New American Wilderness as a design project, it does intend to help make that engagement possible, by describing and defining this new kind of wilderness.
COURSE OBJECTIVES
1. Understand and practice a body of mapping techniques for conducting landscape research, focusing on methodologies based in historical research, geographic, spatial, and material analysis, and visualization.
2. Learn to move fluently between writing and drawing as co-interrogators of landscape.
3. Learn to read specific landscapes in relationship to specific concepts, so as to critique, refine, and revise understanding of both landscape and concept.
4. Understand and critique concepts of nature, ecology, and wilderness within an American context, as well as the American history of related disciplines and practices including forestry, landscape architecture, land planning, environmentalism, and conservation.
5. Participate in the development of a concept of New American Wilderness, formed from within the disciplinary perspective of landscape architecture with an interest in developing the agency of landscape architecture within new territories.
6. Explore six primary characteristics of the New American Wilderness: wildness, sublimity, scale, emergent behavior, feedback and spillover, and synthetic space.
7. Describe the formation of territories qualifying as New American Wilderness through the batch operations, tools, techniques, disciplines, and practices that construct them.

FORMAT
Class time will typically be divided into two halves. The first will engage the week’s readings, primarily through discussion, but also lectures and guest presentations, furthering the conceptual background of the course. The second will engage the semester term project, through student presentations, review of research progress, and discussion of research methodologies via case studies.

ASSIGNMENTS
Readings
Readings will be assigned for each course meeting. Students will be expected to complete all required readings (typically one or two texts per week) and be prepared to discuss them (see below). Additional “supplemental” readings will often be provided and may be read at the student’s discretion and interest.

There are no required texts for this course, but we will read a fair bit from *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, if you want to pick up a copy and avoid dealing with PDFs.

Discussions
Students are expected to contribute to and be involved in each and every seminar discussion. To facilitate this, students are expected to come to class prepared with at least one question—of any reasonable kind—about the week’s reading(s) and at least one comment—an intentionally vague term—about the week’s reading(s). The instructor will collect these at the beginning of class.

Term Project
The primary project for the semester is a term project composed of four cumulative assignments. Each assignment will conclude with a presentation to the class; the final presentation, on November 13, will be cumulative and conducted with a jury audience. Final revisions to the term project will be due digitally on December 11.

The term projects will be group projects; each group will engage a study territory within the Great Lakes Basin, considering it as an example of New American Wilderness.

Assignment 1: History
The purpose of the first assignment is to understand the history of landscape change within the study territory, particularly landscape change arising from anthropogenic influence and activities. Students will catalog relevant moments, spans, and fields of change, re-organization, and bifurcation within technological, political, corporate, economic, social, logistical, industrial, infrastructural, cultural, and ecological domains, in order to understand and explicate the many
landscapes that have existed within each study territory. These catalogs will be recorded in a spatialized timeline and reflected on in a short written abstract.

**Assignment 2: Networks**
The drawings produced for the second assignment will chart significant material movements, relations, objects, fields, and actors within, into, and out of the study territory as it presently exists, with the intention of gaining an understanding of the material metabolism of the study territory.

**Assignment 3: Construction**
The third assignment will document both the successes and the failures of the tools, techniques, disciplines, and practices that collectively influence the formation, current state, and future trajectory of the study territories, paying attention to the potential capacities, present deployment, and documentable effects of these various instruments.

**Assignment 4: New American Wilderness**
Projects for the fourth and final assignment will delineate, through data visualization, mapping, and written reflective text, characteristics of the New American Wilderness as they manifest themselves in the study territory, including emergent behavior, feedback and spillover, and synthetic space, as well as their sub-characteristics.

**Peer Evaluations**
Students will provide confidential (but not anonymous) peer evaluations of their group members at the end of the semester.

**Digital Structure**
At the end of each assignment, all due work should be uploaded to the course Dropbox before presentation. No grades will be assigned to work that has not been uploaded. An appropriate folder will be provided within the Dropbox. Files should be named using the following convention: "NAW_[assignment number]_[last name]_[description]". For instance, if I turned in a description of findings for assignment 1, it would be labeled "NAW_1_Holmes_findings.pdf". Files not properly named will be treated as late work and evaluated accordingly.

**GRADING**

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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>PEER ASSESSMENTS</td>
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Grades will be awarded using the following letter scale:
A exceeds expectations in every way, with distinguished mastery of material
B consistent and strong work that meets requirements and evidences moments of exceptional development with good mastery of material
C satisfactory work, meets basic requirements with basic mastery of material
D unsatisfactory work. does not meet all requirements
F failing or incomplete

**ATTENDANCE**
Attendance is mandatory for the scheduled duration of each class session. Arriving late or leaving early, unless authorized by the instructor, will be considered an unexcused absence.

**COMPUTERS**
The use of computers to participate in class is both permitted and encouraged; the use of computers to avoid participating in class is unacceptable and will result in a grade penalty.
# Academic Conduct

Students are expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the ruleset described in the Ohio State University code of student conduct.

## Schedule

### History of the American Wilderness

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lecture Title</th>
<th>Required Readings</th>
<th>Supplemental Readings</th>
<th>Term Project</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>W 8/21</td>
<td>Introduction: The New American Wilderness</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>W 9/11</td>
<td>Wilderness Enacted</td>
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<td>in-progress discussion</td>
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### Shifting Conceptions

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<th>Week</th>
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<th>Lecture Title</th>
<th>Required Readings</th>
<th>Supplemental Readings</th>
<th>Term Project</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>W 9/18</td>
<td>Ecology and Environmentalism</td>
<td></td>
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<td>present Assignment 1: History; receive Assignment 2: Analytic Territorial Geography</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>W 9/25</td>
<td>Critiquing the Wilderness Ideal</td>
<td></td>
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<td>in-progress discussion</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>W 10/2</td>
<td>The Anthropocene</td>
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### Constructing the New American Wilderness

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<th>Week</th>
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<th>Required Readings</th>
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<th>Term Project</th>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>W 10/9</td>
<td>Batch Operations: Tools and Techniques</td>
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<td>present Assignment 2: Analytic Territorial Geography; receive Assignment 3: Construction</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>W 10/16</td>
<td>Batch Operations: Disciplines and Practices</td>
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Supplemental Readings:
Term Project: in-progress discussion

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW AMERICAN WILDERNESS
10 W 10/23 Emergent Behaviors
Required Readings:
Supplemental Readings:
Term Project: present Assignment 3: Construction; receive Assignment 4: New American Wilderness

11 W 10/30 Feedback and Spillover
Required Readings:
Supplemental Readings:
Term Project: in-progress discussion

12 W 11/6 Synthetic Space
Required Readings:
Supplemental Readings:
Term Project: in-progress discussion

13 W 11/13 Final Project Presentations
Term Project: receive Assignment 4: New American Wilderness

14 W 11/20 Studio Reviews
- W 11/27 Thanksgiving
- Tu 12/3 Classes End
- W 12/4

15 W 12/11 Final Projects Due

Influences
Colleagues, friends, writers, and thinkers who have particularly strongly influenced the development of the ideas considered within this course include: Case Brown, Brian Davis, Brett Milligan, Stephen Becker, Geoff Manaugh, Paul Kelsch, Koert Van Mensvoort, Hendrik-Jan Grievink, Keller Easterling, William Cronon, Donald Worster, Elizabeth Meyer, Barry Lehrman, Erle Ellis, Pierre Belanger, Bruce Sterling, Paul Roncken, Benton MacKaye, David Nye, Kristina Hill, and Jane Wolff.