Post-Urban/Suburban Landscapes: Design and Planning the Centre, Edge and In-Between

Professor-Emeritus Helen Armstrong,
Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney.

The concept of landscape in contemporary cities is in a dynamic state of flux (Daidalos, 1999; Waldheim, 2006), yet urban design and planning tends to see landscapes as merely open space for recreation and areas set aside as nature reserves or urban public space (Vienna STEP05, 2005; Sydney Metropolitan Strategy, 2004). Such a reading is superficial and ignores the rich and complex contribution that landscape can play in 21st century cities. Limited interpretations of contemporary landscapes are of concern because urban landscapes, in the broadest sense, are being eroded in the city centre and at the edge, as well as in the wide area in between.

Despite theories that post industrial cities are characterised by fragmentation, fluidity and uncertainty (Soja, 2000; Koolhaas, 2004), the globalising forces of late capitalism (Jameson, 1991) are resulting in new ubiquitous and predictable landscapes of consumption in contemporary cities (Harvey, 2000, 2005). It is difficult to discern innovation, apart from environmental, in new plans and designs for buoyant redevelopments in Australian cities; meanwhile there are two major landscape types that are losing the battle against late capitalist urbanism; the peri-urban edge of productive lands and the left-over spaces of cities – the urban voids.

Despite such concerns, there are emerging landscapes of infrastructure in the post-urban/suburban fabric that, although seen negatively, are nevertheless intriguing sites worthy of a new interpretation.

In the context of a number of international approaches to the increasingly urbanised landscape, this paper explores the significance of complex landscapes in post-urban/suburban Sydney. It articulates a number of concerns about policies for Sydney landscape and proposes ways to reconsider current planning and design. It begins by questioning contemporary spectacle cities.

Questioning the 21st Century City of Spectacle

Sitting in a café at the edge of a busy urban waterway in Rotterdam, one can ask why redevelopment in Rotterdam – one of the busiest ports in Europe – can maintain layers of the future, present and past, while it would appear that Sydney has surrendered its layered landscape to become a typical city of spectacle and consumption resembling one of David Harvey's degenerative utopias of global capitalism (Harvey, 2000).

Although the Situationalists questioned the spectacle city of consumption as early as the 1950s-60s (Sadler, 1999), they could not have predicted the scale of permanent spectacle and commodification in 21st century cities (Harvey, 2000). In Sydney, this is particularly

evident where vast swathes of former waterfront industrial land are transformed into high-rise housing, waterfront restaurants and tourist facilities.
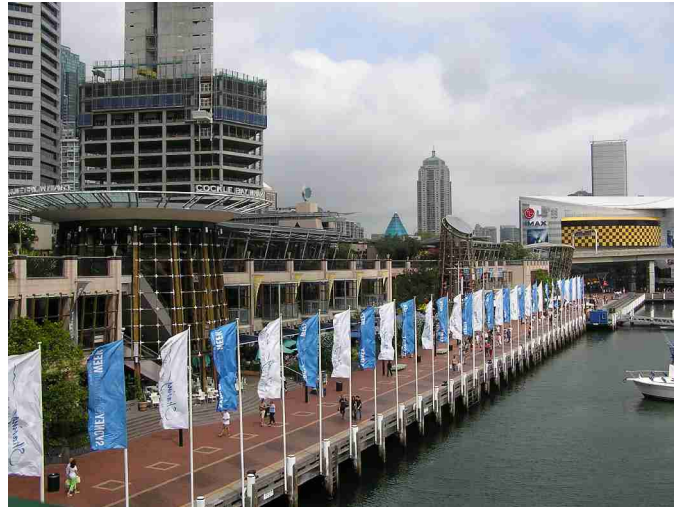
City of Spectacle: Darling Harbour, Sydney, 2005 (a.p.)
Photographer: Helen Armstrong

It is not only the changes in former harbourside industrial sites; open areas, seen as waste space threaded throughout the suburbs and at the rural edge, are also being rapidly redeveloped.

How can such urban development be tempered so that complex land-uses can co-exist, including the urban voids; those messy, unkempt, apparently unused places which are so important to the patina of our cities?

Urban Void, Brisbane, 2000 (a.p)
Photographer: Helen Armstrong

This paper questions simplistic planning policies which encourage redevelopment of all vacant sites, despite their former or current use. It argues for complex urban landscapes where work, living and play can co-exist, such as the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority Working Harbour Agenda (NSW Legislative Council Hansard, 1998), however various state planning forces are undermining such efforts.

It would seem that unless landscapes are used for recreation or nature conservation, they are merely spaces to be exploited. As the French landscape theorist, Christophe Girot (2004), indicates, they are considered to be 'landscapes of contempt'. This way of seeing the urban landscape begs an important question – '*What are the values of urban landscapes beyond nature and play*?'

Ignoring David Harvey's (2000) warnings about degenerative utopias of global capitalism, developers and politicians argue that the community wants the pleasurable landscapes of spectacle cities. But this paper asks: where are the meditative places for urban introspection? How do we quietly reflect on the culture of our everyday life and our recent past? How do we commune with 'place' as a layered landscape – complex and disturbing as much as reassuring? How do we regain the ability to accept the 'ugly' with its strange and resonating qualities?

Such challenges, this paper argues, need a new language to describe the landscapes of contemporary cities so that a more nuanced understanding can inform decisions about urban development.

Contradictory Theories about Design and Planning the Contemporary Urbanised Landscape

The design and planning issues related to post-urban/suburban Sydney have a world-wide context where contradictory theories abound about sprawling contemporary cities. Ed Soja has argued for some time that mega-cities, such as the sprawl of Los Angeles, are huge urbanised landscapes, discontinuous, fragmented, polycentric and a kaleidoscope of social-spatial structures – '*Postmetropoles*' (Soja, 2000).

In Europe, there are varying responses to the sprawl between the old city centre and the rural edge. The Swiss architect/planner, Xaveer de Geyter, in his book *After-Sprawl* (2002), has analysed six post-urban areas in the 'Blue Banana' of Europe which curves from London, through the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, down to the urban structure of Veneto. All are considered as one loosely connected 'sprawl' generating a new urban form, fuelled by globalised economics and facilitated by new infrastructure. Although the scale of emerging urbanised landscapes causes concern, some designers and planners also celebrate their anarchic qualities (de Geyter, 2002; Koolhaas, 2004). Artists and designers in Melbourne recognise such qualities (van Schaik & Golling, 2006), however, in the main, the design of Sydney's urban space does not challenge the consumerist paradigm.

In Germany, the urban planner, Thomas Sieverts also moderates his criticisms of the new urban form that makes up contemporary European cities in his book, *Cities Without Cities* (2003). Sieverts particularly focuses on the new city edges which he calls 'the Zwischenstadt' or the urbanised countryside. His analysis of the situation in Europe reveals it to be less free-market driven and more socially responsible than North American cities, but still beset by problems of large scale and homogeneity.

Perhaps the European country most beleaguered by urban sprawl is The Netherlands. As a result the Dutch Government has funded numerous innovative planning projects,

making The Netherlands the focus of interest for designers and planners around the world, particularly the work on *Metacities* (1999, 2003) by Winy Maas of MVRDV architects.

In Northern Italy, another response has been to resist the impact of globalised urban development through 'Cittaslow' or Slow Cities (Knox, 2005). This growing movement had its early beginnings as the Slow Food movement, building on the idea that local produce and local communities can maintain a resilience that tempers globalised economics. Citteslow's charter focuses on cities maintaining local identity, particularly through the tradition of food production in the surrounding countryside. Emerging farming cooperatives in Western Sydney, inspired by Citteslow, have started to develop micro-tactics for urban agriculture (Mason & Docking, 2005).

In strong contrast, the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas (2005) sees the European, USA and Asian city as part of a globalised phenomenon allowing for the design of new urban forms which celebrate indeterminacy, fluidity and hyper-reality. He argues that urbanism of the future should explore uncertainty through 'enabling fields' which accommodate processes but resist being definitive urban forms (Lootsma, 1999). He sees particular potential in Asia for new ways of conceiving mega-cities. Despite his aspirations, much of the new development in China follows Western models, including the recently completed simulacrum 'Orange County, Beijing' (Münch, 2004).

There is much potential for innovation in the emerging movement, Landscape Urbanism (Mostafavi & Najle, 2003). It began in the wastelands of Detroit with designs exploring indeterminacy in the form of landscapes of both focussed intensities and wide-spread forces derived from abstract computer mapping (Waldheim, 2006). Landscape urbanists are interested in how permanent and temporary landscapes can restore dynamism in post-industrial cities in innovative ways, such as 'intermediate landscapes' of both community action and environmental flows (Park, 2005). Again, designers in Melbourne are exploring the ideas espoused by Landscape Urbanism, whereas in Sydney, it would appear there is neither the government interest nor the client base.

Where do Australian cities sit within these diverse responses to the impact of globalisation on contemporary cities, and what can be predicted for post-urban/suburban Sydney? The paper suggests that Australian cities are somewhere between the privatised landscape of the North American cities and the urbanised landscape of growing European cities. The Gold Coast and its penchant for gated communities is more akin to post-suburban Orange County, California. Sydney with its growth of a poly-centred urbanised landscape around the old city centre and its associated problems of urban sprawl is closer to the European model. Thus Sydney could be a complex and multi-layered urbanised landscapes, but there are three significant problems; the dominance of market-driven development, the loss of urban voids and former industrial landscapes, and the erosion of the urban/rural edge of market gardens, orchards, and grazing.

Current Dynamics within Sydney's Urbanised Landscape

Given the contradictory responses to planning and design for post-urban cities, what are the current dynamics in Sydney's urbanised landscape? Six landscape issues and their associated problems are explored here.

Natural to Cultural Landscape

Cultural landscapes connect us an ancient past where human settlements continue to be underpinned by an original landform and hydrology, even if both have been altered significantly. Sydney has extensive natural landscapes, north and south, over distinctive sandstone landforms. It is mainly Sydney's west that has absorbed the different settlement layers, traces of which can still be read. With the dramatic changes in current urban development, both in scale and speed, there has been an historic rupture making it increasingly difficult to discern these traces, particularly those of the recent past.

Cultural to Natural Landscapes

Since the 1960-70s Environment Movement there has been a growing impulse to restore pockets of indigenous habitats in the urban fabric and to set aside vestiges of former natural landscapes for protection. These are cultural actions which fetishise such landscapes as treasured places. Recently their cultural value has increased as they have also taken on an engineering role to clean up urban water. In Sydney, increasing development pressure means bushland landscapes are often all that remain as large open space areas.

Recreation Landscapes to Theme Parks

Recreation in the landscape has changed. Increasingly landscapes have become destinations for commodified play. Festival markets, themed waterfronts, and theme parks along with major stadia for spectator sport are now common features of contemporary cities. The alienation of large segments of parkland for activities requiring entry fees has changed many of Sydney's passive recreation landscapes.

Working Landscapes to High-rise Housing

The changing nature of industrial activities has resulted in numerous industrial sites becoming redundant. Australian cities have tended to follow the London Docklands model where former industrial sites are redeveloped for the growing market of new inner-city dwellers interested in high-rise living within a café culture.

In Sydney, spurred on by the buoyant property market, particularly around waterfront areas, many actively working port facilities have relocated. As a result, working landscapes and the diversity associated with areas in which people both live and work have been replaced with relatively uniform high and medium-rise residential developments.

Peri-Urban Landscapes to Low Density Housing

There has been a dramatic loss of urban/rural edge landscapes in developed countries. This is a major concern because cities need productive land to produce perishables that

cannot be transported over long distances (Sinclair et. al., 2003). In Sydney, once thriving market gardens now cling to the last vestiges of fertile soil, a precious resource for Australian cities. New low density housing developments, often recreating pseudo-rural settings, encouraged by Local Government zoning, for example 'rural residential' or 'parkland living', is discouraging environmental sustainability and wasting a scarce resource (Armstrong, 2004) .

Privatisation Planning Strategies

The changes to urban landscapes described here while delighting many, are nevertheless of concern, because urban planning strategies continue to follow a development model based on globalised capital. This involves on-going withdrawal of government funding for public facilities and increasing privatization of urban life, thus decreasing the possibility of social responsibility and innovative approaches to urban development. Understandably, in a market-driven environment, the private sector resists exploring innovation because it is economically risky.

Thus post-urban/suburban Sydney is emerging with a certain predictable urban form, but can it be different? This paper suggests that there are a number of ways in which Sydney's urban landscape can address the issues described, including innovative ways to maintain the peri-urban productive lands, revising the approach to urban voids, and developing a way to empathise with the new and emerging post-urban/suburban landscapes.

Maintaining Peri-urban Productive Land.

There are four critical issues that need to be addressed in order to maintain peri-urban productive landscapes.

The first is to develop innovative forms of land tenure so that owners can realise the value of their land without changing the rural use. Parallels can be drawn with the loss of built heritage in the 1960s due to unbridled growth. The crisis was addressed through innovative forms of land tenure enabling property owners of heritage buildings to realise similar capital returns to those who owned non-heritage buildings. This was achieved through transfer of development rights. A similar strategy for peri-urban lands has been explored in some US cities (Armstrong, 2005).

The second issue relates to local government planning and new forms of governance. Many Local Governments are pressured by the electorate to rezone agricultural land to housing. At the State level, new legislation is clearly necessary if an integrated approach to regional lands is to be achieved. At the same time, at the local level, different forms of governance are necessary if local government and communities are to engage in the emerging economies which can provide alternatives to endless land speculation.

Europe and North America offer models of new forms of local government planning that allow for innovative conflations of rural/nature conservation/ recreation and urban areas. In these new forms of productive land, there is the possibility to draw from existing

Australian cooperatives such as the organizational strategies associated with Total Catchment Management and Landcare groups (Allison & Armstrong, 2003).

The third issue is economic, namely how to make the continued productive use of land attractive to new purchasers. The recent market growth of water products, ecosystem services, and niche marketing of gourmet products are just some of the emerging changes in rural economics. Both Barr's discussions about *Future Agricultural Landscapes* (2003), and the US-based *Urban Agriculture Network*, have been catalysts for exploring new forms of urban agriculture, including micro-farming, in Western Sydney (Mason & Docking, 2005).

The final issue relates to the design of these new forms of green space. In Europe, design of urban space is often seen as an enabling tool for new partnerships between communities, new economics, infrastructure, and new design technologies to re-invigorate natural systems. Proposals for peri-urban land need to be embedded in good science, a thorough understanding of markets and community dynamics, moving forward as changed spatial formations through innovative landscape and urban design approaches (Armstrong, 2004).

The clarity and conviction of these statements is in strong contrast to how we should recognize the indeterminate and oscillating value of urban wastelands – the voids.

Design & Planning with Post-Industrial Urban Voids

It was the Barcelonan urbanist, Ignasi De Sola-Morales (1996), who first alerted planners and designers in the early 1990s to the value of urban voids. He argued that urban planners needed to revisit the concept of *Terrains Vagues* – those strange and undefined empty city spaces.

Terrains Vagues were initially observed by photographers in the 1960-70s. They noticed the beauty of the abandoned spaces in cities and their photographs created ways to see these places affectionately. The French called such spaces 'terrains vagues'. In French, 'vague' has etymological roots in oscillations, instability, or fluctuations. 'Vague' also means vacant, empty, or unoccupied. In English, 'vague' means indeterminate, blurred, or uncertain. Empty urban sites embody all these qualities.

De Sola-Morales suggests empty places are fundamental to the evocative potential of the city. They are latent places where the absence of use can create a sense of freedom and expectancy – the space of the possible. The challenge is what to do with the numerous post-industrial voids?

In the early 1990s, De Sola-Morales suggested that their special qualities should be understood and respected and he warned against doing predictable designs for such places. By 2005, Sydney has lost most of these interesting voids under just such predictable designs.

New Housing on Former Industrial Site, Sydney 2005 (a.p.)
Photographer: Helen Armstrong

While it is hard to argue for leaving these sites free of development, the new Landscape Urbanists are exploring designs in post-industrial areas as a new form of urban ecology (Waldheim, 2006). For example, using the vast dystopian wastelands of Detroit as sites for speculation, landscape architects Charles Waldheim and James Corner developed proposals for urban voids that contain a new hybrid urbanism of dense clusters of innovative urban activity co-existing within a remediation-in-process and reconstituted ecology (Shane, 2004).

Perhaps in Sydney, the pressure for urban development, the prime location of the post-industrial lands, and their relatively smaller scale compared with Detroit, has acted against innovation. Nevertheless, not all urban voids are post-industrial sites. There are opportunities for innovation and enabling landscapes (Lootsma, 1999) on the diverse wastelands that thread throughout the city.

Planners/designers in the Ruhr Valley in Germany spent ten years exploring innovative possibilities for waste lands. The region, while still maintaining its strong industrial forms, now incorporates commercial development, agricultural land-use, ecological rehabilitation, and recreational areas. A key to the structural change in the region was the International Building Exhibition at Emscher Park whose goal was to identify flexible habitat factors for the region (Lootsma, 2002). There are many lessons for Sydney here.

Another major challenge embedded in these left-over spaces is whether a new urban form can emerge by advocating restraint of urban growth. The architect, Kyong Park and his Detroit-based International Centre for Urban Ecology (iCUE), has brought together artists, scholars, pragmatists and grass roots organisations to generate a body of work that triggers the imagination for models of planning that are not based on growth and prosperity. As politicians and business interests are committed to Sydney as a global city, one doubts if the planners would consider this possibility?

Respecting Uncanny Urban Spaces

Given the likely political resistance, one can equally argue for the subliminal meanings and poetics embedded in these voids and wastelands. Poets and artists, exploring the fragmentary human experience of the 21st century world, are similarly concerned that wastelands are disappearing and with them the powerful connection between dereliction and beauty (AGNSW, 2005).

It is not only their aesthetic qualities; these spaces provide uncanny resonances, both hauntingly familiar and unfamiliar. Uncanny spaces allow for reflective engagement with the problems of identity, self and other, the psyche and dwelling, the individual and metropolis (Vidler, 1992). In Sydney, a large number of post-industrial sites have disappeared. Their former exploitative social and resource implications have been replaced by a sense of fragility and vulnerability. In this context, in Europe there has been a renewed interest in the Situationists' notion of 'dérive', a way of randomly walking through the vacant lands of the city as a new form of engagement (Debord, 1998; Armstrong, 2006).

Dylan Trigg in his essay, *Uncanny Space of Decay* (2004), suggests that we are drawn to the transgressive qualities of these sites. They are characterised by a particular intricacy associated with derelict space – 'an embroidery of decay' – so unlike the uniform housing and commercial developments that now occupy such spaces.

It is the age and corrosion, holding historical narratives that we may prefer to forget, that challenges the apparent safety of the new. The history of these sites is recent and for many, still painful. Dereliction and decay in these urban voids speak of a recently failed enterprise, not a nostalgic romanticised time of long ago.

Industrial Landscape, Sydney 2000 (a.p.)
Photographer: Helen Armstrong

Twigg supports the idea that such spaces are uncanny. He suggests that there is a seductive melancholy associated with dereliction, where absence and presence highlight the disunity between the homely and the unhomely. He reiterates Freud's argument that 'the uncanny is something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light' (Freud, trans 1985). In this context, derelict urban spaces imply failure, so by rapidly

replacing them with new apartments and places of spectacle communities erase uncomfortable memories of such a collapse.

But the uncanny does not remain repressed. It continues to haunt and question the complacency of the new. As Twigg suggests, uncanny sites conflate the past with the present and presence with absence and in this uncanny state they challenge us.

The psycho-geography of places has also been revisited. Strongly argued for by the Situationists (Sadler, 1999), it has regained interest as a reaction to globalization's impact on cities. Anthony Vidler (1992, 2000), the architectural theorist, conflates psycho-geography of place - a complex mixture of memory, experience and place – with the uncanny. He sees the uncanny as a trope for imaging the lost home of post-industrial society (1992) and he suggests the unsettled urbanity of late modernity, evoking a feeling of powerlessness, is embodied in new public space (Vidler, 2000). In this context, existing urban voids act as a counter narrative and form of grounding (Vidler, 2000).

Re-thinking Post-Urban/Suburban Spaces

In contrast to the difficulty of justifying why urban voids should be maintained, new post-urban spaces are seen as the unstoppable urban condition of today. While many urban planners and designers see post-urban spaces as placeless and out of scale (Relph, 1987), others have begun to engage with ways to understand and possibly celebrate this new urban landscape.

Sieverts (2003) describes post-urban space between the centre and the edge as the 'zwischenstadt' or 'between space', characterised by a diffuse and disorganised network with random islands of geometric urban patterns. Rather than being disparaging about urban sprawl, he suggests there is a fine-grained interpenetration of open space and built form that is worthy of study.

He argues that these spaces are commonly experienced negatively as fragmented and incoherent because it is difficult to conceive a legible whole. Such spaces could equally be perceived as having a high degree of complexity where there is a certain richness in discontinuities, in diverse ecological and social niches, as well as enabling a sense of spatial enlargement (Sieverts, 2003).

He conducts two-day tours through the bleak periphery of Cologne, where he tries to convey to local people the beauty of discontinuity in these areas. Regularly dissected by motorways and other infrastructure, they can result in surprisingly rich experiences of space.

Motorway, Sydney, 2005 (a.p.)
Photographer: Helen Armstrong

Nevertheless, post-urban/suburban landscapes exhibit social problems where the middleclass create guarded districts against marginalised communities. The French sociologist, Alain Touraine (1996), argues it is possible to address such problems by bringing about a sense of identification with this fluid landscape. He suggests that continuity and unity exist within the scattered elements of the post-urban, even though they are fragile, incomplete and transitory. The challenge is to find a language that enables this spatiality to be understood so that qualities of familiar as well as difficult to comprehend places become legible and elicit a sense of empathy and belonging.

Finding the Language of Post-urban/suburban Landscapes

With these challenges, any language of post-urban space needs to include multiple landscape meanings. The recent art project *Western Front: Art as Social Space* (2005) explored a number of evocative ways of revealing human engagement with Western Sydney's landscape. In a series penetrating photographs and captions of the wastelands of Western Sydney, Chris Cairns reveals his identification with such places. One caption states:

> I grew up across the border. Past outer Western Sydney where freeways, shopping malls, and petrol fast food strips start to break down. Everything involves car travel – involves accepting the stillness and passivity of being a passenger – elongating your sense of place 'til it is able to inhabit the journey itself.
>
> Somewhere along one of those late night homeward-bound drives you find the core that connects the mobile space with wood-smoke arcadia. You couldn't see it at first because it is only visible at night, late, deserted. You need to look at the margins, near the half-constructed freeways, the abandoned drive-ins and boarded shops.
>
> Then it is there and if you slow yourself down enough, you can feel it (Cairns, 2005).

Not only do the photographs and anecdotes bring out the empathy with these landscapes, they also convey the importance of movement and distance. These spaces are predominantly experienced by car, so a language of landscape needs to bring out how fluid spatiality can link with meaning. In this situation, filmic techniques used in cinematic space can provide rich interpretive potential.

In contrast to engaging with the detail, De Geyter (2002) has developed representations of vast post-urban landscapes. Using orthodox landscape analysis and mapping techniques, he has sought to communicate the broad-scale qualities of post-urban space in selected European cities. His aerial analyses, augmented by detailed on-ground pictorial work, have produced innovative syntheses, which he calls 'emerging negative space'. This work starts to provide a new awareness of the spatiality of 'sprawl'. However, his work has not captured the fluidity of post-urban space. This is the realm of cinematic techniques and new forms of imaging developed through topological computer algorithms (Gregory, 2003). Together they have the potential to provide dynamic ways, both social and physical, of understanding the constantly changing and interpenetrating nature of post-urban spatiality.

The key to this new language of landscape is to evoke interest and engagement by the wider community with what is currently seen as ugly urban sprawl. By understanding the legibility of the whole while also seeing the form and dynamism of the particular, it is suggested that a new language for post-urban/suburban landscapes could facilitate and empathy where people will '…*want to discover its tensions and contrasts between public and secret, order and chaos, high culture and garden gnome, between districts bursting with dynamism and those which seem to have been asleep from time immemorial, between accepted beauty and the discovery of beauty in the ugly.'* (Seiverts, 2003: 52)

Conclusion

In the context of the globalising forces of late capitalism, is the resulting urbanism post-metropolitan, post-urban or post-suburban? This paper argues that the urbanism is a post-urban/suburban mosaic held together by a complex urbanised landscape worthy of deep study. In the case of Sydney's urban landscape, there are a number of issues that require new approaches to design and planning.

The paper suggests that resilient cities in the 21st century need to reconsider current planning and design approaches in order to re-establish the complexity within landscapes. The importance of wastelands, dereliction and uncanny spaces has been articulated thus requiring innovative ways to work with urban voids so that their special role for the urban dweller is respected. Also needed are innovations that hold the peri-urban productive edge; a number of which have been proposed. Finally, there is a dynamic area of research in developing a language for post-urban/suburban spaces, drawing from the human values in contemporary arts, sophisticated mapping and the diffuse world of computer algorithms and cinematic techniques. With this language, the wider community can be engaged and empowered to participate in more nuanced decisions about their post-urban/suburban environment.

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