SHIFTING LANDSCAPES

INTERSECTION OF NATURE, CULTURE, & STORY

IN QUEENSLAND AUSTRALIA
ABSTRACT

With a densely populated coastline and a core almost void of human habitation, Australia allows a unique perspective into the dual natured actions and beliefs of humans and our environment. Looking toward shifts in the landscape both natural and cultural, my research focused on these interactions internationally in Australia and domestically. I present it now compiled together with images and thoughts in a self-published magazine.
LANDSCAPE

"10 VERSIONS OF THE SAME SCENE"
STORY
Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.

— Jane Jacobs

As a relatively new human phenomenon, we have entered into a long, complex debate about how best to organize and manage these cities.

Sidewalks and street lamps, tall towers and asphalt give us a sense of order and organization. A control over the unruliness of the natural world.

Still, there is a certain chaos that takes form within a city. It is a chaos which cannot itself be created or controlled, rather it is formed by the inhabitants of that place, walking, riding, driving, moving, speaking, and listening. In all directions, in every place there are people moving about their daily lives. Alive and existing within their own realm, seldom aware of others around them. A life somehow existing together and apart, communal yet private.

Take a moment to pause here.
Stop, wait, and listen.
There is melody amongst the noise.
Order in the chaos.
Hope in despair.
A bittersweet moment of belonging among apathy.

A moment broken by the rhythm of song.
Bringing back our awareness toward our surroundings.
The city around us falls into focus as a crowd gathers beside two young musicians setting up their post for the day. Tuning their guitars and setting out their case for collection.

Street performers are a break in the uniformity of cities. A reminder that we are not alone in this urban jungle, that there are others out there: creating, hoping, dreaming. Still we pass them by sometimes, uncomfortable by their shrivelpness.

They bring about a realization and a mindfulness that there are people in all of these places and that while each of us are alone, we exist here all together. Dependent upon one another, each of us labor independently to pay our dues and make our way. The knowledge we gain and work we accomplish, though, is defined by its interaction with those around us, those who listen and pay attention to what we have to offer, as we do them.

Standing in the middle of a busy side-street in Brisbane, Australia I am at once alone in a foreign country, shuffled past by tourists and locals of all ages and types. But here beside me sit the two performers, the guitar tuned and ready, hands clasp the strings, and they are off. A world unto themselves, yet one shared with us all.

I pause and wait a moment more, listening to the chords escaping through the wooden case of the guitar. Stirring, I move closer, toss a few coins in their case and smile.
HUMAN NATURE

especially within the realm of tourism.
Locations, coveted for their beauty, their identity, and history are the places we tend towards. Yet, these are the same places which are most harmed by human impact. They are places unknown and unkempt by those who visit.

So why do we?
There is a sort of disconnected bond between humans and nature. We are at once apart and together, natural yet unnatural. As humans we have found a multitude of ways to separate and protect ourselves from the natural world.
Climate controlled buildings provide comfort from the elements while agriculture and storage keep us safe and healthy throughout all seasons. Still, somehow we are drawn to the wild.

We long for the light breeze on our face, the chill of a morning, and way sand and soil feel squished between our toes.

We long for the places unknown, unexplored. An escape from the monotony of our daily lives. Such is our idea of nature, a concept so separate from our lives and homes we hope to seek it out, making time and place for it on some idle Saturday.

But the world is not unknown, and we are not somehow distinct from the natural world. All around us is a part of nature; within us too.

The wilderness and wild we continue to search for is much closer than one may think, and we can realize finally what we have always had access to.

The world is beautiful and complex, and within her we can find much more than we ever thought possible.
There are times we act, as we so often do, as though we are not a part of the world around us. Tourists in another land which does not affect or really concern us. Perhaps, though if we recognized our connection and our place among nature and all those living in the world, we might feel differently.

As I sit in my over-sized cushioned seat, belt strapped across me for protection, the world beyond passes me by.

It is easy to feel removed as I am separated by the single pane window, but as I rest my cheek on the glass I feel the cool of the air, the land, the trees and know that I am there.

Nomad K'gari (meaning paradise), Fraser Island was home to the Butchulla people before being established as a tourist and logging site.

FRASER

Sometimes we go to places because they are beautiful, other times places are beautiful simply because we are there.

Driving along the weathered, sand-beaten roads, heads bob to and fro as our giant tour bus jumps and falls with the contours of the road, a homage to the former logging industry of this area.

I stare out the window as Craig, our tour bus driver, tells us the history of the island around us.

Shaped over the course of hundreds of thousands of years, as sand was carried by water and wind, Fraser is an ecosystem entirely comprised of sand.

It is an island in constant shift. As sand continues to blow and wash in from the sea, covering the vegetation, and leaving wind rippled dunes in its wake.

“Now day is ever the same” crackles Craig’s voice over the intercom.

In time though this sand will pack down and vegetation will again grow, fertilized by the many bird species on the island. The rain forest is restored once more, and the cycle begins again.

We seem to follow suit in our own way as humans. Constantly in shift, teetering between civilization and wilderness.

We have always had a complex relationship with the land. We use it, change it, save it, idealize it, romanticize it, and live on it. We employ science to study it, but how often do we take the time to understand our relationship with it?

To ask ourselves, if we are we a part of the land, and nature too? Or are we just visitors?

These are curious thoughts to consider,

— John Muir

IN EVERY WALK WITH NATURE, YOU RECEIVE MORE THAN YOU SEEK
With a mixture of awe and respect we sit, cross-legged listening to this tall, dark skinned man as he runs around grabbing props and telling us the stories of his people, the land, and the bond between them.

We were granted an aboriginal welcome to the University of the Sunshine Coast by Lyndon Davis, a local man descended from the Gubbi Gubbi (Kabi Kabi) people. Lyndon is a part of a family fortunate enough to have stayed on their home lands during the time of forced removal and relocation for many aboriginal families. With a childhood full of stories and history, Lyndon grew up learning pieces of his culture which he now studies pedantically and shares with visiting groups like ours.

The stories he shares come from a different realm, they are pieces from the Dreamtime when all creation was made, where the land, animals, birds, and fish are all connected in one vast network of relationship.

The narratives here are a vehicle on which information and knowledge can pass from one to another. A time for knowledge and communication.

In other cultures, such as our own, these stories are often referred to as myths or legends. Indeed, stories within themselves carry a fictitious sensation. A created dream-world separate from reality. But that is not what they are.

In a sense they embody within the truth of a culture by which its people live and learn. Ignoring this is as if setting a mirror before a culture and yet covering the other side.

The narratives shared and passed down are a part of ones identity; a reflection of who they are and where they are from. Grounded in the landscape both physically and culturally.

There was something more which Lyndon said. Something unique that stuck with me from his talk.

As he stood amongst our group, reaching down to prepare another artifact display, Lindon spoke with us as though he were thinking to himself.

As almost an after-thought, he pondered the future of his son and niece and their relationship to his work. He thought out loud that they will, inevitably, most likely want for something different. A life more modern and new. "That’s fair, they probably will." He conceded, “but you’ve got to learn your basics first and then the other things aren’t so hard.”

This seemingly simple acknowledgement, so light-hearted, holds such a heavy weight. There is a tendency in most all cultures, to hold on tight to these ideas of tradition and custom. Especially within those cultures so far on the edge and in the fringe, whose people are a life-force to its survival. It is good to know ‘the basics’, to learn from our history and understand our past. As Lyndon said, otherwise we are at a loss for who we are and where we belong. Our past is as much a part of who we are as our choices we make today.

But in such a world that we exist in now, there is need for innovation, for understanding and context of a world that encompasses many generations of cultures.

So often, cultures, especially indigenous and aboriginal, are separated, idealized, and conformed, casted to fit a certain mold. One in all, all the same. But life, with all its patterns and design rarely fits neatly like that and culture is far from static.

Life is messy, and un Kemp. So too, is culture.

Lyndon spoke of traveling to various places, speaking with others and learning their culture. Finding and understanding the ways in which we understand this world we live in.

In the end, we are at once a part of our own land we inhabit, that which we inherit, and those we choose to visit.
Lady Elliott island first rose above sea level around 1500 BC as coral rubble spit. Which then, through organic process hardened into beach rock.

LADY ELLIOTT

The sound of glass shattering pierces my ear as I carefully adjust my footing; the rough coral cutting into the bare skin under my foot.

We have been on this island for a mere 6 hours and already we could have walked round it about 12 times. Not surprising though considering the island has an area of less than half a square kilometer. It is a beautiful little spot, full of life and diversity.

Each time I stop to look out over the reef, I am caught by the understanding that this land which I stand on, is not land at all. Rather, it is the product of a life’s work. An island of skeletons.

Australia is home to the largest network of these islands. Measuring about 344,400 sq km, the Great Barrier Reef is composed of over 2,900 individual reefs creating 900 islands total.

These islands are built, piece by piece through tiny organisms, or polyps, whose life’s work centers on building colonies and who, in death, create value and opportunity for other life to grow and flourish.

In life, these polyps construct an exoskeleton strong enough to endure well beyond their death. These skeletons are then built upon, layer by layer until at last the mountain on which they established themselves sinks into the sea and they break beyond the surface, where life is once again given opportunity to develop.

It is this which causes me pause. This system of structure calls to memory that of another which I am familiar.

We seem to have this belief that our thoughts and ideas are our own organically, but we fail to recognize those before us who, like the coral, have built a structure on which we stand. On which invention flourishes.

I used to worry before, and at times I still do, that none of my ideas were truly my own. That, in essence, I was just repeating and repackaging something which had already been said.

On this island though, there are patterns, similarities within the organic matter, but these organisms are built upon others not identical to themselves, a platform for life and ideas.

Ideas then, indeed, are truly not just our own. Yet they are not simply repetition either. Instead, they are an accumulation of what we know and understand. What we learn and how we build on it.

Our trip, thus far, has taken us through cities and urban sprawl, into cultures and the countryside. Together we have experienced a variety of landscapes; a foundation of new knowledge and experience.

Like the polyps, we are architects of our own design, building on those before us, and providing structure for those beyond us.

It is not the strongest species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.

- Charles Darwin
TINY ARCHITECTS

LADY ELLIOTT