Rural Metabolism and the Future Small Town
RELEASE FORM

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April 26, 2017
Part I:
Rural Metabolism and the Future Small Town
GP I

Part II
Learning from No[w]here:
Narratives of a Forest
GP II

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Part I: 
Rural Metabolism and the Future Small Town 

GP I 

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Abstract

Metabolism: The chemical process that occurs within a living organism necessary to maintain life. It is the function by which internal mechanisms navigate varying inputs and outputs of energy, material, and resources to achieve an optimal state in which to thrive. For a small community, metabolism is the capacity to self-organize and flourish, regardless of external realities that are uncertain, and at times, in disrepair. Grounded in the rural context, 'Rural Metabolism' challenges the critique that small, remote communities are becoming stagnant and obsolete in an increasingly urbanizing world.

This project seeks to articulate a design process that engages with small communities. The approach emphasizes participation of designers in the community beyond traditional means of engagement workshops and site visits, borrowing from ethnographic research methods to illustrate the power of individual narrative and its role in the design process. Methods of engaging with the community of study, Quadra Island, will take various forms, through gathering and representing qualitative information, sharing resources and inquiries for evaluation and critique by locals, learning from the successes of other designers working in small communities, informal conversations, and presentations at local community events. The end goal is to celebrate individual identity and articulate its value in the collective image of a place.

Ultimately, engaging in this process requires that designers working in small communities begin to occupy the role of the facilitator and communicator, enabling unlikely relationships between stakeholders and engaging locals in unlikely conversations. Ideally, this process will inspire a renewed attention to detail, locale, material, and craft, providing a language for locals to participate in the metabolic tendencies of their community and imagine new relationships with their built environment.
"We are bombarded in architecture books with statistics confirming the ubiquity of the urban condition, while the symmetrical question is ignored: What did those moving to the city leave behind?"

-Stephen Petermann, OMA
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This project seeks to contribute to a small but growing body of interdisciplinary design research on the future of rural communities in the face of rapid urbanization. As a body of work concerned with design research, this project offers insights to disciplines outside of the design profession working within rural communities. This arguably, is the premise for contributing to intellectual knowledge, and the inherent interdisciplinary pursuits within design practice offer yet another lens through which the topic of rural development can be studied (Kizos et al., 2010; Reuker & Roberts-Smith, 2018).

Landscape architecture in particular provides a lens through which scientific methods of data collection and analysis (often portrayed through multi-scale mapping, site planning and cataloging) are layered with socio-ecological evidence to produce site-specific form and character (Deming & Swaffield, 2011). When employed effectively, this results in better management, planning and application of design strategies that elevate living standards of communities, while simultaneously enhancing the natural and cultural character of communities. Landscape architecture’s unique ability to apply multi-scalar dimensions to projects sets it apart from other professions working with rural communities. From global flows of goods and services, to regional narratives, to local relationships, that in turn, inform site specific interventions, landscape architects think globally and design locally. By engaging with these complexities and distilling them into local design landscape architecture is uniquely positioned to lead the design of vibrant rural communities in the increasingly urbanized world.

Chapter One positions the project within the larger interdisciplinary context of rural urbanization, highlighting the need for design theory and practice that responds directly to specific attributes of the ‘rural’ condition. Chapter Two is a discussion on current global design practices and theories emerging from a contemporary discourse on rural urbanization. Rural urbanization research is a young discipline that has caught the attention of the global design community. Chapter Three begins with an introduction to the site where the design phase of the project will focus on: Quadra Island, located in the Discovery Islands - an archipelago off the East coast of Northern Vancouver Island (Fig. 2). The chapter culminates in a provocation suggesting ‘methods of engagement,” which will commence in the second half of this thesis work.

Fig. 1 (opposite)
Morning Provisions - Quadra Island locally sourced goods and their relative proximity to each other
Coffee: Aroma Coffee Roasters (3.5km)
Pottery: James Pottery (300m)
Salmon Berries: picked off Sutil rd. (100m)
Jam: Traded with locally grown carrots (1.5km)
Image by the author
Four research methodologies are used throughout this research. These approaches aim at engaging in a holistic inquiry into the relevance and necessity of situating design work in rural communities. A tactical sequence approach (pg 5-6) illustrates the cumulative arrangement of research topics and questions that guide the work throughout this project. The goal of this research endeavor is to define the qualities of rural communities within their unique and isolated context to explore new approaches for designers to engage in meaningful ways.

1.0 Literature Review
The paper begins by situating the topic of urbanization and ruralism within the global context. A review of the current design research literature speculates on urbanization of rural communities, and the evolving relationship between these diverse settlement patterns. This basic overview helps situate the research topic within an interdisciplinary breadth of knowledge.

2.0 Qualitative Research
This research approach seeks to acquire knowledge framed by gaining an understanding of the ‘social being’ and socio-contextual elements of the site of study. Studying the vernacular of a community helps designers understand building materials, craft, and techniques embedded within local knowledge (Brinckerhoff, 1984). As such, qualitative research will play an important role in gathering contextual evidence that will inform design decisions in this project. Research in the form of photographic cataloging, sketching, mapping, diagramming (informed by methods of Venturi et al., 1977) will develop a greater understanding of the materials and practices that inform cultural elements embedded within local building and landscape forms.

3.0 Case Studies
An important directive for this research project will be through the lens of the case study. A case study serves as a valuable research tool because it provides an in depth analysis of a single place that acts as a model that can be replicated and learned from (Francis, 2010). By focusing on a specific location for this research, Quadra Island (see Fig. __), the case study methodological approach aims to build new theories relating to landscape architecture working within transitioning rural communities. Furthermore, case study and precedent investigations from around the world will provide a breadth of knowledge and lessons learned that will inform design strategies for the site. Precedents from an offshore UK colony, Canada, and Japan are explored.

4.0 Engagement
The 2015 Recommendations from the State of Rural Canada Report highlights the need for activation and engagement of rural community participants in the planning process; however, traditional forms of the urban public engagement process do not necessarily fit the model of the rural community diaspora (SORC, 2015). As such, developing new forms of engagement in the design process that are authentic, inclusive, non-judgmental, and spatially generative are essential.

Ethnographic research, an approach borrowed from the discipline of anthropology that studies individuals and cultures, offers valuable insights to participatory design research (Pena, et al., 2017). If employed successfully, ethnography can reveal narratives that connect individual identity with the identity of a place. This is particularly useful as a compliment to qualitative research, which through contextual evidence, typically gives a sense of the collective identity of a place. However, efforts to appropriately engage in ethnographic field work can take years of data accumulation and working with various stakeholders - a time frame that is not achievable within the scope of this project. Rapid Ethnographic Assessment Procedure (REAP) offers a potential solution to the short term time frame for which this project is explored (Taplin et al., 2002). The REAP methods used by Taplin et al. (2002) during their design of a heritage park in Philadelphia such as semi-structured interviews, behaviour mapping, and transect walks across the site provide a precedent for engaging REAP methodology on Quadra Island in part two of this thesis.
Rural Urbanization

Learning From Nowhere

Engaging The Site

GP2 Site Analysis + Design

How, and with what consequences are rural spaces being urbanized?

What strategies can designers employ to engage thoughtfully and with greater success in rural communities?

Where do you belong in your community?

How do you belong in your community?

Transport + Utility
- Roads
- Energy
- Water
- Internet
- Public space
- Natural Disaster
- Relief
- Climate change adaptation

Identity
- Ethnographic Design Research
- Creative Engagement
- Rural Innovation + Experimentation
- Vernacular Craft + Knowledge
- Materials + Practices

Resource + Economy
- Fishing
- Forestry
- Agriculture
- Adventure Tourism (kayaking, biking, camping, whale-watching, hiking)

GP - 1

GP - 2

Rural Metabolism Methodology

4

5

6
The major corpus of work done within Landscape Architecture focuses on the design of urban environments. A result of this hyper focus is the neglect of rural communities in both research and design (Carlow, V.M., & Institute for Sustainable Urbanism, 2016). As OMA’s Stephen Petermann explains, today’s notion of the countryside is comparable to the 18th century classification of terra incognita, wherein our preoccupation with the city has left the rural in disarray (Petermann, S., interview by Carlow, V.M., 2016). This neglect of the countryside by the design community is particularly troubling given that 99.5% of the landcover on earth is exists as “countryside” while the other 0.5% is becoming an obsessive reiteration of the metropolitan hyper-landscape (Maat, 2015).

In light of these figures, the relevance of designers turning their attention towards the non-urban is important for a number of reasons such as the reality that 45% percent of the population, or 3.4 billion people are overshadowed by a compulsive focus on the urban as the only model for modernization. A need to articulate the valuable role small communities play in supporting urban settlements, while simultaneously dissolving the dialectic relationship between urban and rural typologies as symbols for the future and past is essential and will be explored further throughout this essay.

Fig. 3 (background image)
2017 NASA Night Light Map
Retrieved from: www.nasa.gov; 11/18/2018

Fig. 4 (diagram)
Rural – Urban Populations + Landuse

45% of the world’s population lives in the ‘countryside,’ consisting of 99.5% of the earth’s surface
–(World Bank Data 2017)
1.1 The Rural - Urban Dichotomy

Recently, urban and rural settlements have experienced unprecedented restructuring. The past 30 years show evidence of the contradictory interplay between rapid urban expansion and varying trajectories of rural stagnation, depopulation, and marginalization (Brenner, 2016). Urbanist scholars such as Neil Brenner, and Christopher Lee note that thinking about ruralism and urbanism as separate concepts is a false dichotomy, and in fact the two are a part of a necessary coexistence in response to cultural and capitalist needs (Brenner, 2015; Lee, 2015). Brenner posits that urban and non-urban territories are merely evolving forms of 'city units,' and that the 'urban-age metanarrative has come to serve as a framework not only of interpretation, but of justification, for a huge assortment of spatial interventions' (Brenner, 2016). While literature continues to assert the superiority of the urban, such claims are ignorant of the very source from which such efficiencies are afforded: the non-urban (Carlow, V.M., & Institute for Sustainable Urbanism, 2016).

Fig. 5 illustrates that 69% of all occupiable land on earth is altered by industrial processes to support urbanization (Maet, 2015).

Meanwhile, the complex layering of rural – urban typologies, and their lack of definitive boundaries is an essential element to the success of the ever growing and densifying city. This is evident in the way that urban areas rely on non-urban territories to accommodate necessary industrial processes, such as energy infrastructure and landfills. The Urban Theory Lab presents a compelling visual narrative of the conceptual musings of urbanization. Planetary Urbanization, is one example of a theory that emphasizes the dialectical relationship between the urbanizing world and the operational landscapes that support urban models, as shown in Fig. 7 (Ibanez, 2016).

Brenner posits that the non-urban does not necessarily refer to the countryside, and that "what we call the countryside or the hinterland has become key to the process of capitalist urbanization" (Brenner, 2016). This raises the question, what exactly is urban?

"To retain the essence of the countryside and to capture its expansive beauty and to sustain the village's engagement with the land through work, leisure and repose, it is perhaps necessary to acknowledge that the distinct separation, conceptually as well as literal, between rural and urban, human and nature, architecture and landscape should be whittled away" –Christopher Lee, Countryside City

Fig. 5 (opposite, above)
Rural - Urban Material Flows
Excluding barren lands and fresh water, 69% of all land is altered by humans in some way to support urbanization.

Fig. 6 (opposite, below)
World Landuse
A breakdown of the landmass categories of planet earth and their current operational/non-operational functions.

1.2 Rural - Urban Trajectories

The recent United Nations reports on world urbanization prospects suggest an inevitable rural to urban migration trajectory (UN World Urbanization Prospects, 2018). The report posits that as of 2018, over 3.4 billion people around the world, or 45% of the world’s population still live in rural areas (UN World Urbanization Prospects, 2018). Regardless of the UN’s projected migration trajectories, this rural statistic represents an immense number of people overshadowed and ignored by the predominant narrative of the global shift towards high density urban settlements (UN World Urbanization Prospects, 2018; Brenner, 2016). The need to break down the rural-urban binary, however, is supported by evidence of global inconsistencies of the definition of rural and urban (Brenner, 2016). Brenner points out limitations within the UN categorization of ‘urban’ vs. rural indicating that different countries demarcate urban designation based on populations ranging from 200 to 50,000 (Brenner, 2016). Global narratives of urban migration, therefore, should be addressed with scrutiny. As Brenner suggests, the rural-urban dichotomy is merely an oversimplified categorization of binaries that does not fit contemporary forms of settlement. Both urban and rural landscapes are inextricably linked, and to ignore one in pursuit of the other is neither productive nor constructive.

In addition, figures of global urbanization are heavily weighted by the massive migration of populations to coastal megacities in the global south. Cities such as Dhaka, Guangzhou, and Bangkok, which are among the fastest growing in recent years, are also situated on highly vulnerable coastal floodplains (Arcanjo, 2018). Increasing populations in these cities, paired with inevitable climate-related disasters such as rising sea levels and high intensity coastal storms puts into perspective the reality of an increasingly inevitable climate refugee crisis (Arcanjo, 2018). Efforts to design cities that are better fortified against future climate events have captured the imagination of engineers (Arup, Aecom) and designers (James Corner Field Operations, BIG). This is exemplified by projects such as the San Francisco Bay Area Resilient by Design Challenge, or the East Side Coastal Resilience Project. Nonetheless, the obvious question remains: Why do cities symbolize the global narrative for creative, innovative and modern technological living standards? In anticipation of a future climate refugee crisis, focusing attention on increasing the living standards in rural areas, rather than retroactively engineering cities in an attempt to defend against future climate catastrophes is perhaps a more long-term solution.

In a lecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, on his recent studio on the countryside, Christopher Lee speaks about the announcement of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to target rural, agrarian settlements in a commitment to decrease the socio-economic division between rural and urban inhabitants in China (Lee, 2015). In recent years, governments in both China and Japan have declared their commitment to revitalizing rural towns in response to rapid urban migration by rural residents seeking social and economic equality (Lee, 2015). These efforts by major world governments offer a promising future for the place of designers engaging in projects outside of the predominant high density urban typology.

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Theories of an Urbanizing World

Researcher Daniel Ibanez at the Urban Theory Lab (UTL) explores visual narratives, in a video titled “Urban” World? The video illustrates a series of concepts describing territorial spaces of the urban and their potential trajectories. From top left to bottom right:

01 Urban Age World: Acceptance of mainstream urban paradigm. Urban is bound and defined by demographics

02 The World is Spiky: Cities are the epicenter for capitalist growth, bound by their increasing relevance as centers for technological innovation and economic production. Urban is bound and defined by capitalist growth.

03 Planetary Urbanization: Emphasis on the dialectical relationship between the urbanizing world and the operational landscapes that support urban models. Urban is unbound and continuous

04 Ecumenopolis: An interwoven web of population networks that extend across geographies. Urban is unbound and continuous.

1.3 Lessons from the City

Currently, there is a need to dismantle the prevailing belief that urban is synonymous with modern. There is no question that high density urban agglomeration not only affords greater economic efficiency, but also provides a captivating narrative that paints the urban as a laboratory for a tangible technological futurism. Speculation on utopian forms of the future city have always fascinated modern culture, especially in the design world. For example, Julian Krupa’s “Cities of Tomorrow” rendering for the August 1939 issue of Amazing Stories (Fig. 8) depicts an urbscape of elevated highways punctuated by aircraft commuters and seemingly scale-less skyscrapers that house the masses (Ndalianis, 2017).

A more contemporary version of the future city ideal is Alphabet’s (an offshoot of Google) 2018 Sidewalk Labs project. A redevelopment initiative sited for Toronto’s Eastern waterfront, Sidewalk Labs aims to address the plethora of crises plaguing the modern city, such as adequate housing, affordability, and walkability (sidewalklabs.com). The project proposes a modular urbanism strategy that responds to the evolving needs of its inhabitants. Underlying the success of the project is the promise of a layer of agile data infrastructure, hinged on the concept of the cyborg city and the capacity for data technology to enable future adaptation (see Fig. 9).

Indeed, the obvious, and most relevant spatial consequence of high density urban models is the efficiency of infrastructure spending, where central governments can easily justify capital spending when the dollar per capita is greatly reduced. Given that design professionals have spent the majority of their careers working to increase living standards in the urban realm, it is logical that cities should be the model for sustainability by which other settlements should strive for. The work of Jane Jacobs provides an example of the success that design expertise in the urban realm can have on elevating contemporary living standards. Her 1961 book The Death and Life of Great American Cities outlines her community-based approach to city building, and is still a highly relevant seminal text for urban designers. In fact, many of the principles driving the aforementioned Sidewalk Labs project, such as walkability and a vibrant public realm, are the same tenants Jacobs argued for in cities like Toronto nearly 60 years ago (Jacobs, 1961). Throughout her career, Jacobs worked to thwart car-centric models of development, denouncing infrastructure spending on expressways. Instead, Jacobs promoted higher density, mixed use building models that activate neighbourhoods and increase social connectivity (Jacobs, 1961).

While the successes of Jane Jacobs should be celebrated and continuously adapted from, it begs the question, what successes of the urban should be adopted by rural communities, and what models of the urban do not fit rural typologies? Jacob’s theory cautions the view of the city as a highly controlled infrastructural system, instead favouring the power of people as a collection of individual identities in creating place (Jacobs, 1961). In many ways, her vision of carving out intimacy and community from the machine of the city is exactly what constitutes the very success of a small community. The opposite challenge, however, persists outside of the city, where strong communities and social networks already exist, but lack the public spaces in which to manifest, evolve, and thrive spatially. This paradox suggests that perhaps the city has much to learn from the small community, as well.
1.4 State of the Affairs

Too often, urban design practices and ideas are inappropriately applied to rural contexts. The preoccupation of design disciplines with the ‘urban’ site over the past 50 years has left non-urban areas in a place that is vulnerable to developer-driven projects (Carlow, V.M., & Institute for Sustainable Urbanism, 2016). These projects lack identity and connection to the community and greater region.

A quick Google Image search was used to gather qualitative evidence on the scale at which development projects are represented in the rural context. Results from searching the term “Rural Mixed-Use Development” suggested predominantly regional-scale, ecologically minded planning projects. On the contrary, results from the search term “Urban Mixed-Use Development” suggests a higher emphasis on the human scale, with most of the images produced in the top results showing eye-level perspectival views.

Fig. 10 displays the top 14 images from the search result. The approximate scale, and therefore level of design detail, at which ‘development’ projects are represented were categorized by the outline colour of each image. 1:1000+, outlined in red represents zoomed out master-planning or site planning scales, in which building massing and relationships between infrastructure and regional landscape systems can be inferred. 1:500-1:250 images, outlined in orange, represent neighbourhood and block-level design resolution typically through an isometric view. Images at this scale suggest possible programmatic activities, circulation, and relationships between individual buildings/structures and the landscape. 1:100 images, outlined in blue, represent the most detailed and resolved stage of a design project. Representation at this scale typically captures the perspective, eye level view of human actors, suggesting an immersive experience in the design proposal that puts outside viewers into the project. The results, although informal and only suggestive as a basis for further research, indicate a significant bias towards regional-scale representation by designers working on rural projects. Given that humans are the primary reason development projects are invested in, shouldn’t designers be working at the human scale? The results from this exercise suggest two possibilities - the first a critique, and the second, an unfortunate and plausible reality: First, designers are not appropriately addressing the human scale of rural communities and are blinded by the vision of the countryside existing only as a pool of resources to support urban interests (see Fig. 5). Secondly, the lack of investment in rural communities leaves little opportunity for designers to engage with the human scale in meaningful ways, thus giving evidence to a lack of detailed design representation within rural development projects. The opportunity for landscape architects to apply their skills in synthesizing conceptual narratives from large scale regional analysis down to a design language that details human-scale interventions is evident, and will help support the vision of rural communities in the face of new development projects.

In The Limits of Limits: Schmitt, Aureli, and the Geopolitical Ontology of the Island (2016), Douglas Spencer summarizes Stan Allen’s 1999 essay “Field Conditions”, which suggests an organizational shift from “object to field” (Spencer, 2016, quoting Allen, 1999). In this new “field condition,” Allen argues to reject architecture’s top-down, object as architecture approach, and instead prioritize the organizational logic of the fluid processes embedded within the field (the landscape) (Spencer, 2016, quoting Allen, 1999).

This is central to the theory of landscape urbanism, which favours networks of infrastructure and ecological processes as the organizational structure of urban growth. While landscape urbanism faces
criticism as a theory and design practice that simply greenwashes and further perpetrates urban sprawl (Mehaffy, 2010) it offers a possible reconnaissance for rural ‘densification.’ This is further supported by Charles Waldheim’s notion of landscape urbanism’s potential to reorganize landscape architecture’s priorities as a practice tasked with ‘city building’, rather than navigating built spaces in search of vacant spaces to intervene (Spencer, 2016 quoting Waldheim, 2016).

Reuse and adaptation of post-industrial or commercial landscapes in urban communities is a key premise in the planning of smart cities to reduce suburban sprawl (Duaney et al., 2010). But in the rural landscape, many development projects are earmarked for landscapes that have a high ecological value because of the undeveloped landscapes that surround them. A model for lightweight site intervention for rural development projects is necessary. This model should strive to reduce construction impact on landscapes with high ecological value and design in response to existing ecological systems, rather than at the cost of these valuable natural resources. Employing strategies from landscape urbanism such as Charles Waldheim’s notion of the landscape as a “performative medium” (Spencer, 2016 quoting Waldheim, 2016) offers the possibility of an architectural model derived from the self-organization and fluidity of the natural processes embedded within the landscape.

Currently, far too many examples of the perils of inappropriate developer-driven architecture exist in communities across Canada. Fig. 11 (opposite), shows the perils of profit-driven development that lacks attention to place. The images portray an array of a residential development projects located in vastly different regions across Canada. When compared next to one another, these projects lack any indication of the location in which they exist. Instead, they are a replicated multi-unit residential model capitalizing on the need for immediate affordable housing. This model is most successful either on the fringes of urban regions, in small communities with aging demographics, or regions struggling to adapt to evolving resource economies. It is a model most effective for boom-bust resource towns where impermanence is the norm and sense of place is considered a hindrance to resource exploitation and capital gains. In pursuit of cost effective models of housing, and the prevalence of cheap land in rural areas, developers are beginning to seriously capitalize on the affordability crisis. Does affordability need to come at the cost of identity? Why are developers making this decision for communities, rather than communities themselves?

In response, many communities have embarked on a process of writing Official Community Plans (OCP) to establish bylaws that protect from development projects such as these. Through a consultative process, municipal or regional electoral areas work with residents and community stakeholders to address future land use and development through the OCP bylaw process. However, regardless of bylaws enacted to protect communities, any mention of the word ‘development’ in a small town typically elicits an armored battle response of NIMBYISM (not in my backyard). This is an understandable response given the egregious forms of development foisted upon these rural communities. The consequence however, is an overwhelming negative attitude towards development that is hindering the opportunity for new forms of architecture to emerge in response to local needs.
One way to visualize the dominance of certain language used in an official community plan to better understand the values and concerns of community stakeholders is through the use of a word cloud generator. Words appearing in larger font are used more frequently, while smaller words appear less frequently. Figure 12 shows a wordcloud analysis of the language used in the Quadra Island Official Community Plan Bylaw 2007 (a rural island community with a population of 2,700). The wordcloud illustrates the predominance of words such as "development," "shall," "residential," "village," and "island" in the document, suggesting potential stakeholder anxieties around issue of development and delegations of land use. Figure 13 shows the wordcloud count for the City of Victoria Official Community Plan (2012). Victoria, located on Southern Vancouver Island, has a population of 370,000. In contrast to the small community of Quadra Island, high occurrence words found in Victoria's OCP wordcloud include "street," "community," "development," "public," "urban" and "design," suggesting a greater focus on developing local community spaces.

1.5 Trends for the Future

As the previous sections suggest, the future global definition of "rural" is transition. British Columbia’s rural communities are facing their own changes in parallel with global narratives of the fluctuating rural - urban dichotomy. As natural resource sectors restructure, local benefits from those economies are dwindling, leading to reduced employment opportunities and shrinking populations (Hanlon & Halseth, 2005; SORC, 2015). In addition, the prospect of a new wave of migration is on the horizon: Disenchanted by the city, young professionals are seeking alternative options for affordable housing, socially-engaged communities, and lifestyles that enable access to wild landscapes (Siemens, 2015; Benson & O’reilly, 2009; Wilbur, 2013).

In response to the current housing and affordability crisis occurring in major cities across Canada, and in parallel with western trends of neo-liberal 'back to the land' ideals, a new wave of younger demographic is seeking alternatives to the city. In contrast to the back to the land movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s which was widely associated with isolation and the desire to depart from increasingly capitalist expectations of cities (Halfacree, 2007; Taylor, 2009), this latest wave of lifestyle migrators has the advantage of being technologically connected to the global economy (Benson & O’reilly, 2009). The implications of this shifting demographic in small communities across BC should be seen as an opportunity. Design professionals need to respond to the metabolizing landscapes and communities of small towns in an effort to protect their values and understand the needs of future inhabitants.
What strategies do designers employ to engage thoughtfully and with greater success in rural communities?

Nowhere is the aptly named preface to Fäviken, which chronicles chef Magnus Nilsson’s pursuit for site specific culinary experiences in Northern Sweden (Buford’s essay Nowhere, in Fäviken, 2012). Fäviken, a Swedish restaurant led by chef Nilsson, is situated (for those traveling from afar) - literally in the middle of nowhere. To eat at the highly acclaimed restaurant guests must travel 600 km north of Stockholm via plane and car – detouring through Norway - to the locality of Järpen, in the Jämtland region of Sweden. In an interview with Magnus Nilsson entitled How to Eat a Pine Forest, (Log, 2015) Alan Weiss points out the paradox in Fäviken’s seemingly middle of nowhere locale, suggesting that “[Fäviken] is among the most site-specific restaurants imaginable, in terms of foodstuffs, sourcing, techniques, sensibility, symbolism: a vegetable garden at the foot of the front door, surrounding woods filled with game and wild mushrooms, local suppliers of dairy and meat, such that the chef knows the very cow destined for his table” (Nilsson & Weiss, 2015). As head chef at Fäviken, Nilsson is committed to a menu that uses predominantly wild, indigenous, locally grown, harvested, and foraged ingredients. This is remarkable given that Fäviken is located in a region where the growing season is short and winters are harsh. It is perhaps these constraints of isolation and dramatic seasonal shifts, that are the trademark of the restaurant’s success. Nilsson’s hyper-local approach speaks to a culinary craft that exposes a “specific place in a specific season to reveal specific flavours” (Nilsson & Weiss, 2015). The challenges of such a task require immense creativity and resourcefulness. Nilsson has discovered that these attributes are fundamental to the success of Jämtland’s past and present inhabitants.

“This nowhere is the most somewhere imaginable, remote as it may be”
-Alan Weiss, How to Eat a Pine Forest

In search of traditional family recipes, lore, indigenous techniques in foraging, and ingredients that evoke the sense of place from which they are grown, Nilsson has successfully crafted an approach that reflects the culture of the place. Nilsson states in his interview “The reason we work so closely with many people in the community is simply that you can’t reflect it without being part of it” (Nilsson & Weiss, 2015).
The techniques used by Nilsson when creating a hyper local culinary experience can be operationalized in the design field as well. For designers working in small communities, the goal should be to enhance the intriguing relationship between a place that identifies as being simultaneously “nowhere” yet “somewhere” deeply rooted in its local landscape and community.

In pursuing a better understanding of how the identity of rural communities can inform design process, Learning from Nowhere attempts to use lessons from both Fäviken and Learning from Las Vegas. The famous Learning from Las Vegas studio, taught by Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi at the Yale School of Architecture in 1968, employed rigorous qualitative research methods to observe and analyze current forms in contemporary cities (their case study being Las Vegas) in the hope of informing new architectural investigations (Venturi et al., 1977). Fäviken’s curation of local materials, practices, and knowledge help to define the experience of a place. This, paired with Learning from Las Vegas’ approach of using observations, sketches, and photography to identify cues in the built environment that inform a future design is the inspiration for the design phase of this project (see Fig. 16).

The following pages distill themes and approaches of designers situating their work in areas that embody this “nowhere/somewhere” paradox. An emphasis on learning from vernacular craft, tradition, local innovation, and lore, paired with a dependency on local relationships are some of the ways that these designers have found success working in...
small communities around the world. In addition, themes such as creative methods of engagement, the suitability of rural communities as testing grounds for innovation, and the evolving role of the designer in building relationships and facilitating community buy-in will be discussed. Many of the offices explored, such as Atelier Bow-Wow, Saunders Architecture and OMA, among others, contribute to a collective vision of the Future Small Town, highlighting the relevance of designers working outside of the urbanizing city typology.

2.1 Current Design Practices

In The Post Urban Phenomenon (2017), Ota Kayoko introduces the Japanese Architecture firm Atelier Bow-Wow, describing their approach towards practicing in rural Japan. Kayoko describes the relationship between the designer and resident as a “Productive exchange”, wherein the designer “mobilizes his or her architectural thinking, on the one hand and the ‘residents et al.’ inform or enrich the architects thinking and eventually learn to think architecturally, on the other.” (Ota, 2017).

Through this approach, Atelier Bow-Wow is working to enable an architectural language by engaging residents in participatory design. The architect empowers residents to see that their community is worthy of good design, of higher thinking, stressing that adaptation to the changes of the future are the metabolic tendencies of any community. This suggests the beginning of a fundamental shift in the values and place that architecture occupies in rural communities. In an interview with the Canadian Council for Architecture (CCA) in a documentary special on Islands and Villages within the posturban phenomenon of rural Japan, Momoyo Kaijima, and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto of Atelier Bow-Wow describe how their approach to working in small communities is less about being an architect, and more about taking on the role of the facilitator to empower local activation.

The author suggests that this shift in approach allows for an alternative to the ‘starchitect’ or individual genius, and puts the ‘genius’ back into the loci - the place, which is ultimately defined by the people who live there. The value once placed on individual genius is now outmoded. Designers in small communities need to put the genius back into the loci - the place, which is ultimately defined by the people who live there. To uncover innovation and opportunity, Kayoko illustrates how design practice must adopt a paradigm shift to guide the way residents in small communities think about development, change and growth.

“In the same way that design thinking has changed the general notion of design, a wider dissemination of architectural thinking may broaden what participatory planning and design can achieve” - Ota Kayoko, Post Urban Phenomenon

Fig. 17 (opposite)
Quadra Island Vernacular
Today, the shell of a barn, adorned with the classic west-coast cedar shakes is a symbolic nod to the landscape’s past agrarian productivity. Inside, however, the potential for a whole new economy of production is limitless.

Image by the author
In their recent project “Momonoura Village,” located in the Tohoku region of Japan, Atelier Bow-Wow, exemplifies an approach where architecture is challenging the notion of traditional commission-based practice (see page 30). In 2011, a 9.0 magnitude earthquake and tsunami devastated the coastal communities of Tohoku, wiping out the village of Momonoura, among many others (Islands and Villages, 2018). The catastrophe killed nearly 20,000 people along the coastline and left thousands more with nothing but wreckage from the disaster, amplifying existing issues of shrinking populations and struggling economies in the region (Japan Times, 2016). After the disaster, however, the Japanese National Recovery Plan failed to mention architects, and few of the farmhouse structures had no relation to their profession’s potential contributions to recovery efforts in these rural areas (Sumner, 2013).

In response, studios such as Atelier Bow-Wow sought to bypass national public funding, instead approaching communities themselves to offer their expertise as leaders and facilitators for a future vision (Sumner, 2013). What set Atelier Bow-Wow apart from other professionals working in post-disaster rural recovery (engineers, government agencies, local non-profits, etc…) is “their ability to observe and identify how things work in space without former design, but link to the culture of history of a place or simply people’s nature.” (Islands and Villages, 2018).

One way that designers are engaging with small communities is through creative forms of research that rely on an ethnographic field-study approach. Ethnographic research is the pursuit of embedded knowledge of a place, and can typically be learned from actively participating in a culture and community (Pena, et al., 2017). In Momonoura Village, Atelier Bow-Wow used the knowledge they gained through conversations with residents – elders, youth, leaders in the community, etc… to draw a map of the village (see Fig. 19). This map became an important visual aid to engage in ongoing dialogue with residents as the team worked in the community. Another example is the work of OMA, a Rotterdam based firm beginning to study modern-day occupants of the countryside. Intrigued by data suggesting that few people living in the Dutch countryside are actually working in agricultural professions, (in Canada, 4% of the rural population works in agriculture, according to the 2016 census data), OMA embarked on a mini ethnographic study to find out what people in the countryside were doing for work. A small team set out on bikes and visited the northern town of De Rijp, the Netherlands – a supposed agricultural community surrounded by farmland. During their bike tour, they visited homes, business, and engaged in impromptu conversations with locals whenever they could, documenting people’s professions and the function of elements in the built environment. The team discovered that many of the farmhouse structures had no relation to the surrounding farmlands, but instead served an array of professional services such as a tax consultant, recruitment office, and yoga studio, shown in Fig. 18 (Koolhaas, 2012). By engaging in conversation with locals about the individual identities that comprise the community of study, OMA revealed the simple but important fact that small towns are typically layered with an unexpected diversity of interdisciplinary skill sets, just as you might find in the city. This also suggests the potential for small communities to function as intersections for creative innovation, born out of their necessity to metabolize with their surrounding economic, social, and environmental conditions.

In a similar vein of thought, Stephen Petermann of OMA speaks about architecture becoming “their ability to observe and identify how things work in space without former design, but link to the culture of history of a place or simply people’s nature.” (Islands and Villages, 2018). One way that designers are engaging with small communities is through creative forms of research that rely on an ethnographic field-study approach. Ethnographic research is the pursuit of embedded knowledge of a place, and can typically be learned from actively participating in a culture and community (Pena, et al., 2017). In Momonoura Village, Atelier Bow-Wow used the knowledge they gained through conversations with residents – elders, youth, leaders in the community, etc… to draw a map of the village (see Fig. 19). This map became an important visual aid to engage in ongoing dialogue with residents as the team worked in the community. Another example is the work of OMA, a Rotterdam based firm beginning to study modern-day occupants of the countryside. Intrigued by data suggesting that few people living in the Dutch countryside are actually working in agricultural professions, (in Canada, 4% of the rural population works in agriculture, according to the 2016 census data), OMA embarked on a mini ethnographic study to find out what people in the countryside were doing for work. A small team set out on bikes and visited the northern town of De Rijp, the Netherlands – a supposed agricultural community surrounded by farmland. During their bike tour, they visited homes, business, and engaged in impromptu conversations with locals whenever they could, documenting people’s professions and the function of elements in the built environment. The team discovered that many of the farmhouse structures had no relation to the surrounding farmlands, but instead served an array of professional services such as a tax consultant, recruitment office, and yoga studio, shown in Fig. 18 (Koolhaas, 2012). By engaging in conversation with locals about the individual identities that comprise the community of study, OMA revealed the simple but important fact that small towns are typically layered with an unexpected diversity of interdisciplinary skill sets, just as you might find in the city. This also suggests the potential for small communities to function as intersections for creative innovation, born out of their necessity to metabolize with their surrounding economic, social, and environmental conditions. In a similar vein of thought, Stephen Petermann of OMA speaks about architecture becoming an armature for active, user-driven agency - to envision adaptation of local context that can serve to engage with community, or creative engagement with community, or creative adaptation of local context that can serve to inform elements of a design approach on Quadra Island.

2.2 Precedent Studies

The following pages highlight specific precedent projects - some designed, some built, in rural communities with similar characteristics to the study site on Quadra Island. Each project offers insights into the design process/approach, engagement with community, or creative adaptation of local context that can serve to inform elements of a design approach on Quadra Island.

![Fig. 18](image-url)  
**Rural Occupations**  
Momonoura is a small fishing village located off the Oshika peninsula in the Tohoku region in Japan. Devastated by the 2011 Tohoku earthquake, the village undertook recovery efforts to retain its population and develop economic opportunities that connect the village to its surrounding resources. Momonoura Village seeks to highlight the importance of the connection between local resources (timber, fish, local food) and the lifestyle of residents in the village. As part of the revival, Atelier Bow-Wow designed a series of small structures that “allow for open exchange of skills and knowledge and greater integration of the modern life with the natural resources surrounding it” (Islands and Villages, 2018). The structures contain number of amenities aimed to attract families, young professionals, and education groups interested in attending lectures, learning about the local skills, past issues of the region, or engaging in excursions with local fisherman, foresters, oyster farmers, and other skilled locals (Islands and Villages, 2018).

Throughout the project, Atelier Bow-Wow’s commitment to engaging in an ethnographic approach in their role as designers is unique, and perhaps a key element of the success of their work in small communities. One strategy used to develop a visual narrative of the village was through a hand-drawn map based on interpretations of conversations with locals. Throughout the project, this map was continuously layered upon to include new information and knowledge as it was revealed (Islands and Villages, 2018).

An inspiring element of Atelier Bow-Wow’s work in Momonoura is their novel vision of architecture, and their commitment to diversifying the role of architectural practice. In an interview with CCA, Tsukamoto states that architects should not only concern themselves with building things; more emphasis needs to be placed on listening, participating in the community, facilitating conversations, presenting ideas, reading, writing, and learning (Islands and Villages, 2018). All of this aids in an approach aimed at trying to understand the internal dynamics and meaning of a place, while simultaneously helping those who live there also find that meaning for themselves.
Originally proposed as a temporary architectural exhibit for the Shodoshima Setouchi 2013, Umaki Camp is now a permanent structure that serves the island community of Shodoshima, located in the northeastern part of the Kagawa prefecture, Japan. The project was funded by the Japanese Government as part of a series of art and architecture installations aimed at increasing tourism to Japan’s shrinking and aging countryside. Although efforts to enhance tourism to Japan’s rural areas through the art triennale are widely criticized as an attempt to “Disney-fy” the countryside, Umaki Camp stands out as an exception as a space enabling local exchange. Following an ethnographic approach, dot architects learned from locals about the importance of food sharing in building social relations. At times during the year when certain crops are plentiful, neighbours gather to cook large meals, pickle, preserve, and share. From this narrative evolved a community kitchen space where people can come together to cook, or leave extra produce from their gardens in the kitchen baskets for others to use if they are in need.

Involvement with the community by the architect ensures that user needs are not overly romanticized. An example of a simple, yet important need that emerged from conversations with locals was the desire for publicly accessible wifi. Today, Umaki Camp functions not only as a kitchen and wifi hub, but an evolving hybrid space that supports local projects and innovations, from a locally-produced radio station to a lecture venue, to a quite sheltered dining area to eat lunch.

dot architects attribute the success of the project to their dedication to maintaining consistent involvement with local stakeholders. This took the form of informal conversations with locals, participatory design events, and a community volunteer - build approach that used techniques and materials familiar to locals. Working as facilitators of design, the architects crafted an atmosphere that empowered locals to take ownership in the project - as a design build opportunity, as well as a space to steward for years to come.

Umaki Camp
Local Exchange Hub

Shodoshima, Japan
Art Setouchi 2013
Toshikatsu Ienari, dot architects

When you try to do something new in the city, there are all kinds of laws you come up against, and it’s hard to do something experimental. But here, Shodoshima is an island. You have to take a boat to get here....Eventually the city will look at these kinds of experimental models in the provinces and say ‘maybe we should change that law, and so on.”

-Toshikatsu Ienari, dot architects

Fig. 22 (opposite, top)
Umaki Camp by dot architects, built as part of the 2013 Shodoshima Setouchi Triennale.
Fig. 23 (opposite, bottom left)
Umaki Community Wifi Station, computer access stations and radio station room.
Fig. 24 (opposite, bottom right)
Umaki Community kitchen.

Images Retrieved from: http://dotarchitects.jp; 11/22/2018
Fogo Island, Newfoundland, Canada
Est. 2004 - Present
Shorefast Foundation + Saunders Architecture

Fogo Island, located off the East Coast of Newfoundland, has a rich cod fishing heritage and long legacy of resourcefulness. After the cod fishery collapse in the 1980’s, inhabitants are still struggling to remain in the community through alternative economic means. The Shorefast Foundation established its roots on Fogo Island as an organization seeking to build economic and cultural resilience on Fogo Island. The Foundation drives initiatives that support their mission of ‘resilience,’ including: investment in local social business enterprise, artist in residence programs that invite skilled professionals and creative minds to the island to share knowledge, and expression of culture and place through contemporary architecture (Shorefast Foundation, 2018).

I was fortunate to visit Fogo Island this summer by bicycle, and immerse myself in the character of the island. I talked with a number of locals, and visited the famous “Inn” - the main economic driver of the Shorefast Foundation, which focuses on high end hospitality in the tourism industry. Most striking from my visit was the series of artist studios scattered throughout the landscape. These studios, as well as the “Inn” were designed by architect Todd Saunders (Saunders Architecture) who engaged in a vigorous design analysis of historical building techniques. His design process combined his style of contemporary expression with that of Fogo’s vernacular craft, resulting in stark architectural interventions that elevate the site and landscape in which they are situated (Stathaki et al., 2013).

Through these studios, Saunders develops a design aesthetic that recognizes the importance of cultural context in rural landscapes. His process and methodology provides insights into how designers in rural landscapes, such as Quadra Island, can express culture and specificity of place through a historical understanding of process, resource, and craft, while simultaneously honoring the “site” from which architecture can unfold.
The Tristan da Cuhna RIBA Design Ideas Competition challenged designers to look at the island community of "Tristan," a remote British overseas colony located on a volcanic island in the South Atlantic. The island is home to 270 permanent residents, and is known as the world’s most remote inhabited community, accessible only by boat. Eight cargo sailings/year to Cape Town, South Africa, provide the only regular service off the island, each with a capacity of only 12 people. Because of challenging weather conditions and ocean swells, boats can access the shore an average of 60 days/year.

The competition identified a number of key design challenges present on the island, such as water management, residential property upgrades, energy supply, and agricultural resilience. The reality of finite resources, coupled with necessary improvements of existing infrastructure highlights the need to address these issues regarding resilience and sustainability for the island’s future generations. Lateral Office’s entry focused on delivering a series of frameworks that would address three challenges on the island: defining a civic realm through courtyards, improving homes through a house retrofit program, and increasing economic opportunities through productive patches across the island. Although they did not win the competition, Lateral Office demonstrated the need for creating the civic dialogue necessary for preserving the unique island culture, social enterprise that supports sharing knowledge and skills, and emphasizing an approach that strengthens the community from within by incorporating the existing vernacular resources, materials, practices, and character.

While Tristan da Cuhna may be the most remote community in the world, the challenges it faces are shared by other resource-scarce island settlements seeking to adapt to a more self-sufficient model (by necessity). Quadra Island, also suffers from a number of island issues such as seasonal water management, agricultural and energy self-sufficiency, and a need for architectural /infrastructural upgrades.

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**Renewing the Remote**

RIBA Design Ideas Competition

Tristan da Cuhna, British Overseas Territory, South Atlantic

2015

Lateral Office Competition Submission to RIBA/Government of Tristan da Cuhna

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03| Methods of Engagement

Community Engagement Field Studies

The following section outlines examples of engagement methods used by designers to uncover hidden narratives. These methods will help inform the approach taken on Quadra Island.

1.0 Practice: Seeing through the lens of the local

How can designers see and understand places through the lens of the locals? An example where this strategy was successfully deployed was in an activity called the ‘Community Camera’ by Chelina Odbert and Joe Mulligan of the Kounkuey Design Initiative. In order to gain insights into the way locals see their neighbourhood and environment, the designers handed out disposable cameras to locals, tasking them to photograph the regular places they occupy and travel through in their daily routine. Upon reviewing the photos, designers discovered new insights about places they would have never thought to ask locals about (Pena et al., 2017).

2.0 Practice: Empowering locals to become the ‘expert’

Effective community engagement requires designers to provide a space for open dialogue. All too often community engagement devalues local knowledge, and places priority on the designer as the “expert” (Pena et al., 2017). In Design as Democracy, the authors suggest the most successful way to empower locals to become the ‘expert’ in the participatory design process is to use “present, engaged listening to understand a community’s needs and desires, providing a chance for participants to tell their stories without being prejudiced by a designer’s assessment and intentions” (Pena et al., 2017).

3.0 Practice: Photo book as community self-reflection


In this study, the researcher spent 4 months in the rural farming town of Waucoma, Iowa to document the daily lives of the community, through photography in an extended ethnographic study. Informants for the research were mainly farm families, the main demographic in the town. The researcher also documented distinct features in the town such as the ecology and architecture, in addition to the natural "patterns" of daily life. This information was gathered through interactions with locals in public and commercial places or events.
3.1 Preliminary Design Approach

The approach for the next phase of this project will rely on the layering of Qualitative analysis of the site, including in-situ investigations, sketching, photography, and gathering of site-specific knowledge with an ethnographic study of individuals, interpretations, stories, and narratives of the island (Fig 34).

Seeking out Stories and Conversations

Semi-structured interviews offer an expedient way to gather local stories. Potential participants that offer a variety of stories, and reflect the diversity of the island include:

- Designers + Builders: (high end, locally built products such as fiberglass kayaks, titanium bikes, musical instruments, boat-builders)
- Artists (We Wai Kai Nation totem carvers, musicians, unique forms of art such as one artist who casts models of rare fish species. Local fisherman bring him their exotic by-catch, hence the incredible collection of fish models in his workshop).
- Experimental Habitation (boat hulls, hand-built cabins, tiny homes, passive house, art farm yurts, post-commune structures).
- Goods + Services (coffee roaster, farmers, bakers, winery)
- Industry (fishermen, fish farms + processors, foresters, mineral aggregate, tree planters, kayak tour operators)

Visiting these places and talking to these people has helped me form an understanding of the island as a collection of unique individuals, practices, materials and histories. The collection of each individual’s story offers insight into the details that make Quadra Island so unique. The curation of these interviews, through documenting conversations, photography, and drawing as a tool for engaging and interpreting will offer a prompt for locals to reflect and engage in their community in new ways. The exploration will also serve to inform design strategies.

Listening and Drawing

Ethnographic research, an approach borrowed from the discipline of anthropology, offers valuable insights to participatory design research (Pena, et al., 2017). If employed successfully, ethnography can reveal narratives that connect individual identity with the identity of a place. This is particularly useful as a compliment to qualitative research, which through contextual evidence, typically gives a sense of the collective identity of a place. Using this approach to engage with the community on Quadra Island, has the potential to reveal design cues that will inform larger design decisions in the second half of this project. Figures 33-36 show an example of how this can be applied using the tool of drawing to engage with the narrative of a place.

After gathering and printing photographs, the researcher then returned to the community to conduct a series of interviews. These interviews sought to gather further evidence concerning community life through the social action of viewing photos of one’s own community and social life through the photos. Schwartz suggests that the experience of “in group viewings, photographs elicit extended personal narratives which illuminate viewers’ lives and experiences. [Viewers] routinely respond to photographs by telling stories that stem from specific pictorial elements which seem personally significant. Instead of responding to an encoded message, most viewers’ responses reflect their own social realities. Thus, the social interactions surrounding the activity of looking at photographs provide an arena for studying the interactions of the site, including in-situ investigations, sketching, photography, and gathering of site-specific knowledge with an ethnographic study of individuals, interpretations, stories, and narratives of the island (Fig 34).

Example Research Questions:
(adapted from Schwartz, 1989)

- As rural communities undergo structural change, how do residents adapt?
- How do successive generations view their community?
- How are traditional or social values transmitted from generation to generation or is there evidence of significant socio-cultural change over time?
- What meaning does kinship, community and the notion of the “home place” hold for residents?
- As small towns atrophy what sociocultural adaptations occur?
- How do residents maintain a sense of community as the community’s spatial and cultural boundaries are reshaped?

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Methods of Engagement

Figure 33 illustrates the story of old growth stumps that exist on the site. Without knowing anything about these stumps, a landscape architect might be able to use qualitative research techniques to document and map their locations. The stumps could be imagined as landmarks for wayfinding on the site, indicators of ecological diversity, and nodes of an underground network of mycorrhizae that connect and communicate with other trees in the vicinity. By identifying their ecological value as nurse logs for new growth of hemlock and huckleberry, we can speculate on the role these trees played in history, the approximate year that the tree was logged, and the tools used to fell the tree.

There are many ways to draw, map, and decipher meaning from the symbol of the stump. By engaging further through ethnographic methods, however, another narrative layer is revealed. In the case of the old growth stumps, an imaginary world was described to me by three children who have spent the most innocent and playful years of their lives crawling up these stumps. To them, these stumps become the planets of an imaginary universe. With the forest orbiting around these nodes, the old growth relics act as a central theme in the creative minds of the island youth.

This story of “the planets” was not only compelling, but also evoked certain basic design cues that can be distilled as principles for design decisions. Through storytelling, individual relationships with objects in the landscape can transcend their original meaning. This is a powerful language for designers to uncover, revealing new layers of an old and familiar place to be re-imagined by locals. By listening, and engaging in the playful and endearing imagination of the kids who know this forest through their own insightful frame of reference, many design lessons can be learned and applied to the site. Design cues drawn from the imaginative local children are depicted above, in figures 34-36, providing a sample of the direction of the next phase of this project.

Fig. 33 (above)
The Planets
Drawing narratives from conversations with local Quadra island youth about an imaginary planet world where the stumps in the forest become agents of play.

Fig. 34 (above, top)
Prospect refuge - design cues
Interpretations of a planetary forest inform design cues such as the feeling of safety and community in shared experiences. Being able to see different “planets” from different heights gives the site horizontal and vertical layers of depth and experience.

Fig. 35 (bottom, left)
Openings and enclosures - design cues
Openings in the forest where the “planets” were located gave a sense of space. Warmth from incoming sunlight enters the space, which also allows for first succession vegetation to emerge. Accentuating this open space, however, is the contrasted feeling of enclosure from the surrounding tree canopy.

Fig. 36 (bottom, right)
Access to the tree canopy - design cues
The experience of climbing up the “planets” provide new views and new heights, as if entering into the tree canopy layer. This vertical experience contrasts the feeling of being on the floor and encourages engagement with a whole new world.
## Project Schedule:

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LEARNING FROM NOWHERE

Narratives of a Forest
Part II

Learning from No[w]here:
Narratives of a Forest

GP II

Brittany Shalagan
April 16, 2019
Advisors: Joe Dahmen, Isabel Kunigk

On the cover:
Quathiaski Forest Learning Adventures
Image by the Author
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What roots us to a place? Our memories of a place are often defined by the stories that connect us with our landscapes and with each other. Through storytelling, our relationship with the landscape can transcend its original meaning, revealing new layers of a familiar place. Through an ethnographic design approach of listening, and engaging with local residents of Quadra Island, BC, this project articulates a design method highlighting the power of individual narrative and its role in activating the unrealized potential of a place.

The design delves into the unseen dimensions and processes of a forest landscape, suggesting a lens through which a new form of social commons, rooted in the stories of the places from which we come from, can flourish. As small communities across BC transition to meet the needs of shifting demographics and economies, new forms of living and working in the rural context require a nuanced approach that inspires a renewed attention to detail, locale, material, and craft, providing a language for locals to participate in the metabolic tendencies of their community and imagine new relationships within the larger timeline of their future built environments.
5.1 The Island

Quadra Island, the community of study for this project, is located 300 km north of Victoria, BC, on the east coast of Vancouver Island. It is the largest island in the Discovery Island Archipelago, a network of sparsely populated islands scattered between the narrow inside passage between Vancouver Island and the Sunshine Coast, off mainland British Columbia (Fig 38). The Island is well serviced from Vancouver Island by BC Ferries via a 15 minute car and passenger ferry ride from Campbell River, running hourly. Quadra has a population of 2,700 permanent residents, which can double during the summer months due to seasonal residents and tourism-related activities.

Population: 2700 - 5400 (seasonal)
5.2 The Neighbourhood

The project site is a forested property, known locally as “Quathiaski Forest.” The forest is 27 acres of privately-owned land, located between the de-facto Quathiaski Cove Village centre, the Quathiaski Cove ferry terminal (10 min. walk connecting Quadra to Vancouver Island), and the We Wai Kai Nation at Cape Mudge (Fig. 40). Quadra remains the unceded territory of the Laich-Kwil-Tach people, the first inhabitants of the island and surrounding region. Today, approximately 150 members of the We Wai Kai Nation/Cape Mudge Band, a group of the Laich-Kwil-Tach people live on the island, primarily at Cape Mudge Village.

Quathiaski Cove Village, locally dubbed The Cove or Q-Cove, contains the core commercial area on the southern half of Quadra Island, including a grocery store, post office, public library, credit union, tourism information center, pharmacy and medical clinic, art gallery, and a few other small commercial shops (Fig. 41). The central location of the Quathiaski Forest to the village center allows the site to function as a gateway and a meeting place for the entire community.

Quathiaski Cove Village is designated as one of the higher density neighbourhoods on the island, affording a more interactive and social community atmosphere. This is in contrast to the typical remote acreage properties of the island, that are largely hidden away on large swaths of private land.

Changes and development on the site must adhere to the Quathiaski Cove Village Plan (Bylaw No. 120), enacted in 2011. The Village Plan documents the social, economic, and environmental goals of the neighbourhood, while also providing a guideline for future development (Comox Strathcona Regional District, 2011). Designated as a Comprehensive Development Area (CDA-1) within the Quathiaski Cove Village Land Use Plan, the project site is considered a village amenity, holding significant development potential to enhance the value of the village core (Comox Strathcona Regional District, 2011). Currently, the site is zoned as Residential One (R-1). As a CDA, development densities for the site range from 10-25 units/ha (4-8 units/acre), depending on density bonusing parameters such as accessibility, affordability, and public greenspace allowances. Areas on the site designated Village Center Residential (VCR) contain higher density allowances than the Village Peripheral Residential (VPR) areas (Fig 39).
5.3 Project Background

The owners of the site are the founders of a rural design studio called Study Build, whom I have collaborated with on a series of engagement and rural placemaking projects on Quadra Island. Together, we share a common vision and passion for the many incredible opportunities small communities provide for healthy, culturally diverse and sustainable living. As part of starting their company and embarking on a vision that fulfills some of the community needs and values outlined in the Quadra Island Official Community Plan (2007) and Quathiaski Cove Village Plan (2011), Study Build acquired a beautiful property, located in the Quathiaski Cove village, known locally as “Q-forest” - the aforementioned 27-acre forested site.

In Spring, 2017, Study Build contracted a design firm called Snohetta to facilitate a series of engagement workshop to begin ideating community goals for the site. This was an important first step in making an initial connection with stakeholder groups in the community, allowing Study Build to share their ideas and vision for the newly acquired forest land, and gain insights on how that land can provide opportunities for the larger community. The end report summarized a series of programmatic suggestions and site planning gestures envisioned during the various activities during the charrette (Fig. 42).

In the Spring of 2019, Study Build co-hosted a design studio course from the University of Pennsylvania titled “Communal Ground: Advanced Construction in the Rural Landscape”, taught by Rebecca Popowsky (Professor in practice: OLIN/Upenn) and Mayur Mehta (Professor in practice: Snohetta/Upenn). While the studio focused on a number of themes that situate the practice of Landscape Architecture in the rural context, the studio visit to Quadra Island was largely guided by the ethnographic and individual narrative methodology explored in the first part of this thesis project. This provided an exciting opportunity for me to test and facilitate some of the methods of ethnographic inquiry with other students approaching their design work through a similar methodology. This was done through interviews and conversations with local community groups and individuals during the studio's site visit to Quadra Island. The studio visit and collaboration between Upenn and Study Build helped to stimulate continued dialogue in the community about the project site and its future uses.
Design Introduction

This project is about building relationships, with people, and with a forest. The approach places value on the importance of local knowledge and building local relationships and local partnerships in the design process. Engaging with people in the community of study, Quadra Island, and building relationships through their experiences on the site is an act of design in itself. The design proposal is an integration of cultural, ecological, and social relationships on the site. These are initiated through a series of micro-lenses of the forest, and negotiated through a digital toolkit. The entanglement of these two realms of interaction - analogue and digital - enables a deepened relationship with the forest, thickening the human-cultural layer of experience as an essential part of the dynamic forest ecosystem.

Through this approach, the community can begin to develop and share essential knowledge about their environment and their relationship to the ecosystems in which they belong as part of, rather than in place of, future site developments.

The design proposal offers an approach that breaks down the ‘walls’ of the vacant forest property from a private project, to a public commons. The design offers a first step towards building the necessary social capital and public support for the larger project vision. The end product is a mere ripple in the larger current of the site’s development trajectory, yet offers a framework that places the notion of the public commons as the necessary social infrastructure from which development and planning decisions can emerge. This approach will strengthen the goals of the Quathiaski Cove Village (the neighbourhood), Quathiaski Forest (the project site), and the larger community (Quadra Island), while providing the beginnings of a public infrastructure from which to iterate and add to.

Learning from Nowhere situates itself within the larger timeline of the future goals for the Quathiaski Forest property. The proposal is a small step forward in response to the reality that projects involving comprehensive masterplanning require large investments and can take years to come to fruition. Balancing immediate and future community needs and expectations in response to some of the initial conversations that the participatory design processes enables can often be lost in this time frame. As such, the project seeks to position itself as an intermediary that side steps the leap towards the typical architectural/infrastructural project, and instead focuses on developing the ethnoecological relationships between the site and the community.

The proposal does not suggest that architecture and the necessary infrastructure that goes along with it is not relevant in the larger timeline of the project. Rather, the approach posits that the order from which a community project - one that promises amenity and value to the future community vision and whose success is largely hinged on the support of the community - should be born from a deep rooted connection of people to the land. In this way, the social commons becomes the groundwork, the analysis, the creative ‘idea work’ from which development unfolds. It is the first and necessary phase of understanding a place, building stories, and developing cultural connections with a landscape. It is a reorganization of the contemporary attitude towards land ownership and development, which largely diminishes the importance of place, culture, and story as something originating from the landscape, but rather arriving from the architecture.

Design Strategy
6.1 Guiding Principles

Conversation: People
The first part of this work borrows from ethnographic research methods to illustrate the power of local knowledge, individual narrative and its role in the design process. Methods of engaging with the community of study, Quadra Island, took various forms, drawing on previous relationships built while working and living in the community.

The design work was largely informed by the informal conversations I had with locals who, after being accustomed to seeing me working in all the local cafes and the public library, would approach and ask what I was drawing, what I was thinking - they would ask to see the community through my lens, and I, in turn, would ask to see it through theirs. This informality largely helped to break down barriers and expectations in our exchange of ideas, providing a safe and playful reciprocation of insights that lacked the rehearsal typical of public forums in design work. Through this approach, stories and thoughts about a person’s perceptions and experience in the larger community emerged as part of one’s daily musings, liberated from the scrutiny of other opinions.

Narrative Approach: Stories
The design consists of three interventions in the forest. Each area is inspired from a story gathered through conversations with local residents and users of the forest. The stories have to do with play (the planets), cohabitation (the raven midden), and nostalgia (the cottonwood tree). These three stories of the forest are situated in their context, intimately connected within the many dimensions of the surrounding landscape. While these sites are inspired by the experience and observations gathered from individuals during informal conversation, the resulting design gestures lend themselves to interpretation. They seek to reveal the hidden qualities of the forest, providing a vast array of experiences and atmospheres that are unique for each individual.
Lens of the Forest: Micro
Each site is comprised of experiential prompts that remove people from their normal way of thinking, providing a lens through which people can climb out of the epidermis of their adult self and engage in various forms of creative expression. This is akin to a “snowglobe” way of seeing and thinking that liberates creativity and elevates the forest occupant as a miniature in the larger dynamism that is the forest. This “thickening” of the human experience in the forest beyond the singular dimension of the forest pathway provides a range of experiences and prompts towards a way thinking that enhances stewardship and social capital to the land. Through this lens, local users gain a greater understanding of the dynamic processes of the forest, and what it means to cohabit and co-create within this landscape.

Creative Authority + Co-Authorship: Macro
The three designs that follow are named after design thinking strategies: Playful Imagination, Slow Ponder, and Rapid Prototype. They are aimed at empowering the site user with a creative authority that is typically reserved for those that call themselves designers. This is in keeping with the thesis that has been developed throughout this research, that designers working in small communities will find greater success and meaning in their projects if they extend their role to that of the facilitator that empowers creative authority in local community members. Each area seeks to illuminate individual creative thinking, elevating the value of the public user from the observing guest, walking through a piece of private property, to the role of the participant, and knowledge holder.

Beyond the analogue experience, users are encouraged to participate in a digital toolkit which enables a collection of site data - ecological and cultural - to build up essential knowledge and relationships with the environment, and to inform future phases of the project. The end result is a entanglement between a data driven, macro- system and the human-centered, values-based micro-lens of the site. This provides a method in which to engage the site; a layering of human-centered values, experiences, individual perceptions, and the larger socio-ecological sphere in which the site exists. Such a position is essential for building social infrastructure on the site, and activating a public commons that will have a lasting impact on the larger vision and goals for the site in future years.
Narratives of a Forest

Call to Adventure
Citizen Science
Species Identification

Ecological/Educational
Site Analysis Layers

Socio-Ecological Grounding
Individual Experience
Co-Habitation

Cultural/Social
Site Analysis Layers

Acquiring real-time data
Environmental monitoring
User-Inscribed, co-authorship

Dynamic/Evolving
Site Analysis Layers

PLAYFUL IMAGINATION

SLOW PONDER

RAPID PROTOTYPE

Fig. 52 (Above)
Digital Toolkit Cues
Fig. 53 (Right)
Plan

Narratives of a Forest

Fig. 52 (Above)
Digital Toolkit Cues
Fig. 53 (Right)
Plan

Call to Adventure
Citizen Science
Species Identification

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PLAYFUL IMAGINATION

SLOW PONDER

RAPID PROTOTYPE

Fig. 52 (Above)
Digital Toolkit Cues
Fig. 53 (Right)
Plan

Narratives of a Forest
6.2 Playful Imagination

Inspired by our inner childhood wonder, Playful Imagination is about engaging in a kinesthetic experience with the forest. Situated in the mixed alder - hemlock forest character zone in the North West edge of the site, a tensile net structure connects a mounded landscape. These natural forms, developed out of the remnants of logging activities over 60 years ago, characterize the vegetative growth and guide the seasonal flows of water throughout this area of the site.

The intervention is inspired by the story of “The Planets”, in which local children describe their glee in crawling up the series of mounded old - growth stumps. Atop these mounds exists an imaginary universe of orbiting “forest planets.” Bounding from “planet to planet”, the elevated tensile structure offers an experience above the forest floor, providing a dimensions from which users can engage with the ephemeral qualities of the forest watershed below. The site offers both a communal gathering space and a space for exploration and discovery for the individual. Users are encouraged to experience the forest floor from above, crawl, roll, spread, nestle, gather, and explore from behind this new lens of the forest landscape.

Finally, the elevated landscape offers opportunities to enhance the outdoor classroom learning experience for the local Quadra Elementary School. Currently, this group use the Quathiaski Forest for their watershed curriculum, and other experiential learning field trips.
Fig. 58
Playful Imagination: Immersive View

Fig. 59
Watershed Concept Images
Citizen Scientist: Call to Adventure

The digital toolkit of the playful adventurer is a citizen science project. Currently, Quadra Elementary classes use the forest for various educational activities. The educators are supportive of the use of ipad and iphone technologies as learning tools for their outdoor curriculum, and have previously embarked on mapping and species catalogue projects on the site. The Playful Imagination digital application provides an interface to add, archive and access this work, elevating it beyond an educational tool for elementary students. Instead, students, among other users of the site, can geolocate, access and monitor species across the site, providing insights into the dynamic shifts of species across the site, cues for adaptation in changing conditions, etc... Future projects on the site will rely on this citizen-inscribed data to inform planning and design decisions that integrate with the ecological diversity across the site.

Acoustic Recognition
Machine learning algorithm picks up sounds in the forest and send notifications about acoustic surroundings.

Species Identification
Geo-located images of plants entered into database, paired with machine learning algorithm to enhance citizen science engagement and experiential learning opportunities.

Seasonal Prompts
Seasonal trends prompted through data system, such as when to expect neotropical migratory bird species in the area.

Today is September 21, 2021
Neotropical migratory species such as the Western Tanager should be in the area. See if you can find one!

Geolocated Species

PLAYFUL IMAGINATION

Acoustic Recognition

Species Identification

Fig. 60 (Above)
Playful Imagination: Digital View
Fig. 61 (Right)
Playful Imagination: Digital Diagrams

PLAYFUL IMAGINATION

Pacific Water Parsley
[Oenanthe sarmentosa]
Indicator of Nitrogen rich soils and fluctuating water tables

PLAYFUL IMAGINATION

Narratives of a Forest

71 Narratives of a Forest

72 Playful Imagination
6.3 Slow Ponder

As you wander through the forest, a glimmer of white catches your eye. Cradled in a forest nook, just off the path, you notice a peculiar arrangement of seating pods, arranged on a bed of crushed sea shells. This sparks your curiosity and encourages you to venture off the trail to investigate.

Slow Ponder is a series of small forest nooks, situated in the North East edge of the forest, among the seasonal creek and mixed forest character of the site. Inspired by the story of the raven tree midden, Slow Ponder is a space of introspection, co-habitation, a place where stories of the places where we come from are written, and told.

Upon initial investigation, you realize that the “pods” in the forest nook you have discovered are in fact meant to be carried forth throughout the forest, dispersed and set free, for others to discover. Small patches of white shells are dispersed in areas just off the trail, nudging you to discover for yourself, what makes a good space to ponder. You are liberated by the discovery that you have been invited to tread off the path, pod in hand - to find your own personal space of refuge, to share with others, or to keep to yourself.

When you return to the space again, weeks later, perhaps it is as you remember, or perhaps, the stories of another have been layered into your own, shared through oral storytelling or a letter to the forest in the Slow Ponder feature of your digital toolkit. The stories you read of past users direct your attention to the textures of the moss beneath your feet, and the murmuring sound of the spring, shimmering in the dappled sunlight from new foliage among the alder stand above. Suddenly, the lens of your experience is magnified, adding to the tapestry of the forest ecosystem and its bio-cultural processes.
Fig. 66 (Above)
Slow Ponder: Immersive View
Fig. 67 (Right)
Slow Ponder: Concept Images
Dear Ms. Kindbergia oregana,

You must love living in the Q-forest. I certainly enjoy walking through it every day. I hope you don't mind my asking, but how did you end up here, and how is it that all your relatives and you live in such proximity without too much fighting? You share the forest with all of them so well, even when they start growing right on top you!

Dear Mr. Polystichum munitum,

How is it going down there? Sometimes when I walk through the Q-forest I wonder if you mind as I brush past, I don't mean to offend. Did I ever mention that out of all the plants, you're the one that I imagine when I think about dinosaurs? I sometimes wonder what you think about when you see us.

Dear Homo sapiens,

I must say I was surprised to get your letter. Most people usually confuse you and me. Pteridium aquilinum. I suppose that is to be expected for a species that can't tell the difference between Bees and Wasps! As to your query, I always wonder, if you’re not green, how exactly does eating work? Do you photosynthesize?

Dear Miss. Alnus rubra,

I wish I could make friends like you. How did you build such a strong bond with all your bacteria? You guys do everything together! One day I hope for a friend like that.

Dear Dr. Lysichiton americanus,

I know some people may say you’re stinky, but I think your perfume is wonderful. I have some very lovely friends who say you can warm yourself up when it gets cold! But that’s why I like you—you’re so modest.

Dear Homo sapiens,

Thank you for your compliments, I don’t get many these days. Sometimes I wish people would know that my smell is very attractive to some, especially flies. As I like to say, beauty is in the nose of the beholder!

Dear Mr. kindbergia oregana,

You must love living in the Q-forest. I certainly enjoy walking through it every day. I hope you don’t mind my asking, but how did you end up here, and how is it that all your relatives and you live in such proximity without too much fighting? You share the forest with all of them so well, even when they start growing right on top you!

Dear Homo sapiens,

Thank you for your mail, and indeed I do love living here. The moisture levels are great, and the rain is consistent! I suppose it’s a question of perspective, whereas you see sharing as a burden, I was always taught to cherish our close connection, and indeed those around me are happier and even healthier because of it.

Slow Ponder: Letters to our Forest Dwellers

Stories of the places where we come from. What’s in a story? How important are stories to the understanding of our place. Here, the forest ponderer is encouraged to share their insights of the places they’ve discovered and come to love. If we don’t know what the importance of these places are for people, how can the future inhabitants of this land know to protect them? How can they know its history? How can they grow and learn from the knowledge of past users? Here, the stories of the places that we spend time become an important layer in the dynamic processes of the site - a co-mingling of the ecological shifts, seasonal changes, and human interactions of the forest landscape.

The collection of stories, oral and written, serve as a cultural layer of ongoing site analysis to inform future public and private infrastructure projects on the site.

Dear Mr. Polystichum munitum,

How is it going down there? Sometimes when I walk through the Q-forest I wonder if you mind as I brush past, I don’t mean to offend. Did I ever mention that out of all the plants, you’re the one that I imagine when I think about dinosaurs? I sometimes wonder what you think about when you see us.

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6.4 Rapid Prototype

Treading lightly along the main pathway towards Pidcock creek, you round a corner and descend slightly into a seasonally saturated, wet meadow, alder and black cottonwood stand. Suddenly, a gap in the trail appears, replaced by a peculiar inset circle holding a film of water - evidence of the fluctuating vertical water table in this area. This sudden grasp of your attention, directed at your feet as you toe along boulders replacing the pathway reveals the reflection of an intricate forest canopy above.

Rapid Prototype offers a lens across the vertical horizon of the “forest wide web.” A canopy ring overhead frames the delicate limbs of alder and cottonwood, while a “reflecting ring” below highlights the dynamic pulsing of water within the ground plane.

Looking up, you are struck by the complexity of spaces between which you occupy: a whimsical alder canopy, wavering in the breeze, their tufted foliage casting hopeful glimmers of sunlight that dance on the film of water below your feet. You’re enveloped between two steel rings that frame your views out and across the low-land meadow, revealing the larger web of life teeming among the various dimensions of the forest landscape. The spring air is fresh and crisp, and the sweet smell of a nearby cottonwood tree tickles your nose.

Inspired by the story of the Cottonwood Tree - a nearby cherished tree specimen that characterizes this area of the forest - Rapid Prototype reveals to users the vast array of connectivity, encouraging users to engage in creative explorations that allow for small discoveries to assemble into bigger ideas and processes. Light touch design moves reveal and frame the sectional qualities of the forest, highlighting the interconnectivity between forest floor and forest canopy, and the seasonal dynamics that influence our relationships and perceptions to the landscape.
Fig. 74 (Left)
Rapid Prototype: Immersive View
Fig. 75 (Above)
Rapid Prototype: Concept Images
User Inscribed Environmental Data

As more people begin to negotiate the digital toolkit of the Quathiaski Cove Forest, data rich and data poor areas of the site are revealed through an interactive geospatial map. Use of the Rapid Prototype interface allows for acquiring real-time, spatial information about the site's environment, such as temperature and humidity, ambient light, wind direction, rainfall volumes, and various acoustic inputs, at the hands of the site navigator. This data assembles itself in the form of a heat map, promoting users to visit data poor areas and add their ecological and cultural layers, through the interface of the Slow Ponder and Playful Imagination. The constant flux of inputs and user responses allows for the mobilization of a network defined by the users of the site and their interactions with the dynamic environmental conditions, highlighting the importance of site data collection as a dynamic process to inform development, rather than a singular event.


