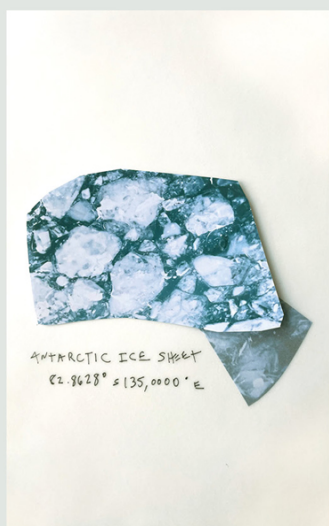
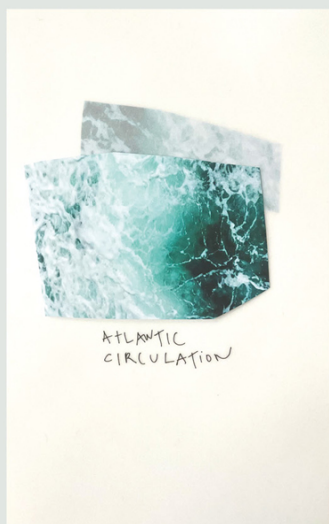




Designing Landscape Architectural Education

Editors
Rosalea Monacella
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Studio Ecologies for
Unpredictable Futures

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7

HOPE IN RESTLESS PEDAGOGY

Rosetta S Elkin

The cascade of planetary warnings and policy failures that contour our recent past are only useful insofar as they might inspire a more prepared and thus equitable future. On 11 October 2000, more than 300 million gallons of viscous coal burst from a slurry dam, destroying fresh river streams across Kentucky, killing millions of fish and altering drinking water resources for human communities. The spill was not an “act of god” as the mining company declared; rather it exposed the corruption of environmental policy.¹ By 2005, Hurricane Katrina followed suit, echoing the social ramifications of unequal policy, when it was framed as “an act of nature”.² The following year, Al Gore’s pursuit of global warming related the cascade of crises around the country to rising temperatures, warming seas and melting ice caps. Global warming revealed to the general public that the vulnerability of infrastructure was not godly and the velocity of a storm was not natural; rather, each disaster was the consequence of human carelessness. Fast forward to the next decade, as the worst fire seasons burned in Alaska, California and Texas, inspiring the term “gigafire”, a word to describe the complex burning of millions of acres so intense it generates another climate. By 2012, the world also invented the first “superstorm” as Hurricane Sandy dimensioned the Atlantic coast from the Caribbean to Rhode Island. These are just a few examples of the lag of environmental regulation, the inability of policy to keep up with the times. Notwithstanding the lag, professions including landscape architecture do little to address the warnings and the misfortune, evidenced by the number of professionals eager to access funding packages, enter rebuild competitions and proffer design solutions that tend only to camouflage static engineering protocols. The problem is no longer that the climate is changing: it is that humanity is not.

This chapter is a plea to understand and accept the past, and leave it there in order to use the present to motivate the future. What this means is that we might adapt rather than “fight” climate change. Adaptation requires restless pedagogy.

At present, the professions are forced to follow the protocols of regulation, policy and governance. But the institution is not. Therefore, the decades of unrest experienced across the planet must be met by an equally restless pedagogy – a pedagogy trying, testing and aspiring to revise the profession. A pedagogy is required that is committed to a future inscribed by change, that shapes how we interpret and respond to, and show up for, the present.

Restlessness embraces change and might be embarrassed by stasis. To be restless is to display continual curiosity, adaptation and growth. Yet, restlessness begins to appear out of place when set against landscape architectural traditions that resist or even disregard change. I can accept the stasis in relation to 20th-century models of modernism, a relic of design in the Holocene. What I cannot accept are static planning procedures that lie prone to the cascade of planetary warnings and policy failures of the 21st century. Witness the inertia of our most predictable park systems, well-intentioned plazas and bespoke masterplan exercises. Witness the pressure of cultural preservation, as pumps and walls are grafted to the rubric of restoration. Witness the rise of sterile cultivars that replace species, so that urban street trees are prevented from seeding, fruiting or otherwise reproducing. Each detail is reliant on outdated standards that actually work against change. What can a raised seawall, a flood-proof square or a layer of dredge really do for a community except *conceal* change? To conceal change is to lie to the public and is a form of climate denial so prevalent it seeps into pedagogy. If professionals believe the landscape shakes and floods with more intensity, or that mudslides, permafrost thaws and fires rage with new frequency, then why not expect landscape architecture to change in turn?

I am committed to a restless pedagogy because it includes collaboration between humans across generations, it thrives as a form of co-creation, it acknowledges the activity of the earth, and it has little use for hierarchy. It encourages a reading of transformation that might not always have clear winners and losers. I am committed to restless pedagogy because I no longer trust received procedures and traditions that lock out equity, or import millions of plastic pots, rely on pacifying water systems, or mulch urban parks with dollar bills at the request of a risk-averse client.

Restless pedagogy is a direct means to advocate for more equity in our standards that range from planting specifications to environmental policy. It addresses the ways professional standards can be informed by research. But it takes effort, and it takes time. It also might not look the same; it might be messier and create a kind of vulnerability because climate impacts are so multiple. As educators, if the response to the crisis is to annex climate dynamics to your research, vie for new funding, insert a “climate” module to a standard-issue seminar or invite a guest to describe how climate affects the field, then you will be left in the neoliberal dust, so to speak. To capitalise on crisis is not only a denial of change itself, it is a blatant form of prejudice against the generation inheriting your mistakes. Perhaps climate change might play an active role in creating our institutions, just as prejudice has played an active role in the systems of education, health care, ownership, employment and virtually every other facet of life since European

colonisation of the Americas. Perhaps the creativity of pedagogy might be allied to life as we *don't* know it.

Allow me to contextualise my position. I am a landscape architect with a deep respect and admiration for plant life. I am also a professor stirred by how increased climate risk is affecting the ways we nurture and share knowledge. As a consequence, one of the first questions I usually field is how I reconcile my interest in plant life with the injustices brought on by climate change. The framing suggests plant life is only a diversion to the weightier climate-based issues that *actually* affect humankind. I have also been accused of *overlooking* human life, implying that studying plants takes away from the significance of racial justice, community impoverishment or gender politics, for instance. In defending my research to fellow plant-dependent humans, I explain that studying plants requires a slowing down, a deceleration that helps me take stock of living on the planet. Rather than work *on* plants, I work *with* plant life in order to engage seriously with being human. Plants bridge the overly siloed tendency to separate design from theory, often framed academically in the detachment of a history seminar from studio culture, for instance. Such constricted ideologies not only divide our worlds and destroy hope, they isolate the past from the present. This is why I resist teaching plants as a technical course, a side-gig to the more intellectual content of the episteme. But I also impart plant knowledge because plants are the surest way to acknowledge the connection between the pedosphere and the atmosphere, the land and the climate.

Restless pedagogy expands by building powerful relationships through non-material agency, revealing that opportunities are concealed in the thick profile of the landscape. To demonstrate what this means, I offer the following three concepts. Consider the student work that is paired with each concept. The methods are grounded in landscape architectural tradition, yet they emerge as a means to track and follow change. Each is isolated, yet the reader will soon notice that they mingle, and cannot be secluded or extracted easily from one another. It is my hope that they will inspire others to think about how to transform landscape education.

1. Policy is under your feet

Environmental regulation and policy are unfortunately trapped in planning, a superficial projection across the thick changeability of the land. Restless pedagogy suggests policy is a sectional dynamic, a distinct subdivision that might be reoriented to reveal the aliveness of landscape structure. The aliveness of the land is currently lost on a public and a profession with their heads bent to the canopy. Standing in a forest, billions of microorganisms, dormant seeds and rootlets are invisible to the collective, despite the fact that their extents far surpass vulnerable crown spread, ownership lines or zoning guidelines. Following suit, models of conservation transform the landscape from a fertile, changing ground which nurtures the future, into a collection of items to be admired, seemingly crystallised in time, much like an artefact locked in a museum or an animal held in captivity. A well cited example of the friction inherent to plan-based environmental policy is

Pando, a giant *Populus tremuloides* organism valued for its spread and its age, despite the fact it is ageless because of its root-sprouting capacity, its life underground. The only way to conserve Pando is to conserve the movement of its roots, since individual ramets are short-lived. Yet, human appreciation still tends to augment with age metrics – champion trees and centennials – making youth less significant and therefore more disposable: the bole radius of a giant sequoia, the extraction of genetic heritage in monumental olive trees, and the physical fences that attempt to enclose millennial oaks. While some practices aim to move away from “saving” the products of nature to embrace the mobile processes of the environment, plant life remains in an impoverished middle ground.

What might emerge from a sectional consideration is the power of longevity, expressed as changeable lifecycles. Consider that longevity remains a mystery in plants, since some seeds only survive a matter of decades while others seem ageless. But to take care of the land under our feet is to advocate to conserve dormancy. For instance, a Judean date palm was germinated from a 2,000-year-old seed, making it the oldest known viable seed. But the tree is only a few years old. Seeds survive across the planet by establishing contingency plans for an unknown future, banking on the thickened section of the soil. Restless pedagogy accounts for sectional movement (Figure 7.1), conserves seed dispersal (Figure 7.2) and explicates landscape change (Figure 7.3). Hope emerges in acknowledging that transformation is not absent, but often radically concealed from notice.

2. Design relationships

With less and less at hand, or underfoot, I notice that students are further than ever from the land, from the plants upon which we depend and from one another. We are linked to one another through our shared experiences of dislocation and displacement. The reliance on scientific certainty and technological prediction increases because we are in an era of low social trust. This means it is easier to trust data than each other. Therefore, a challenge emerges in the gap between the natural sciences and the social sciences, between disciplines that reason and

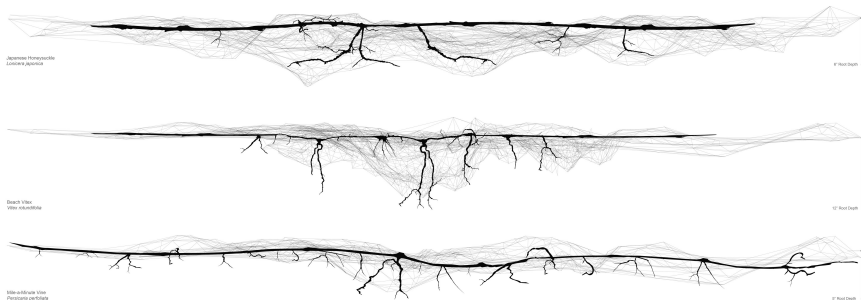


FIGURE 7.1 The aliveness of the soil rendered by movement in the rhizosphere (2014). Canepa, Cox and Li.

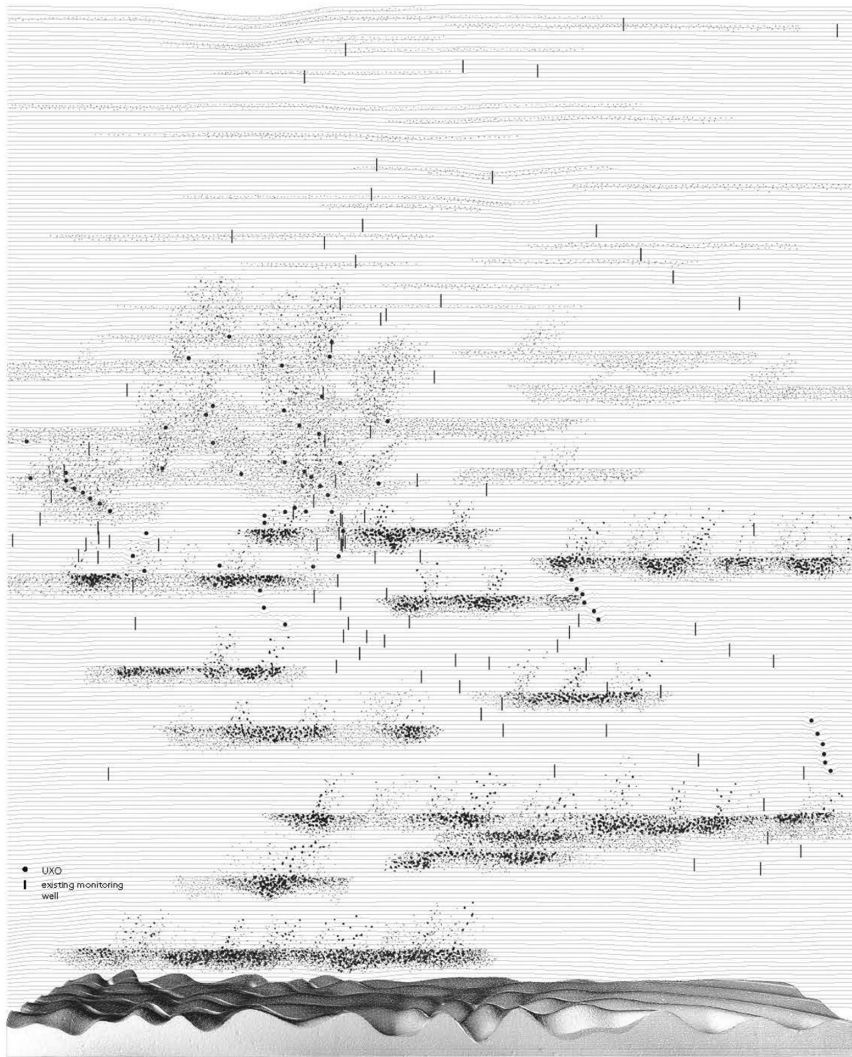


FIGURE 7.2 Serial sections show the thickening of the seed bank, in relation to a landform model (2012). Deuschle, Rodriguez and Zhang.

theorise humankind, and those that study global, physical and geomorphic processes.³ The assertions distance humanity from the land, abstracting our relations.

For instance, it takes 15–20 years to release a new crop to farmers, such that any smallholder farm necessarily invests in and supports scientific research, postponing experimental or indigenous practices due to insurance restrictions.⁴ What smallholder farmers really own is crop insurance, not land or plants, because landowners no longer have any influence on species selection. Once scientised, plants are more easily commodified, traded, replaced and felled. Paying attention to how

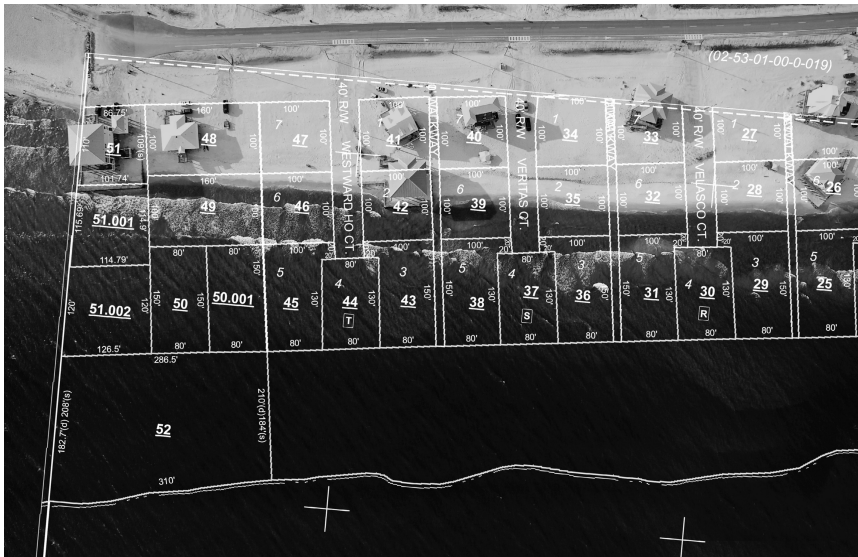


FIGURE 7.3 A fragmented understanding of change creates friction between ecology and policy (2019). Stein and Tsang.

relationships are fragmented reveals the possibility that relationships radicalise what the sciences normally manage to study, and certainly radicalises what is communicated or shared with the public. The elaborate exchange between cells, organisms, bacteria and society suggests science cannot be split from its social context. It also suggests that landscape – at once culture and nature – might be a powerful bridge.

Thus framed, restless pedagogy suggests landscape architects design durable relationships, imagining bonds between one another, between species and with the land, to engender a different kind of power. Designing relationships can be achieved without abstraction, in real time. Students learn to discover the landscape on their own terms, to engage with propagation, classification (Figure 7.4), and first-hand experience (Figure 7.5). The co-creation occurs between who is studied and who is being studied, blurring instruction and instigating a suprapersonal form of knowledge capture.

3. Non-materiality is real

Restless pedagogy critically engages the human: the viewer, the critic, the recipient of design intentions. Consider the role of models in the shift from studio to fieldwork. How can the actions of users be qualified and quantified if durable relationships are acknowledged as design? The actions embedded in a return to the landscape are created by engendering a familiarity with the thick, living soils, the aliveness of plants and the determination of moisture, for instance. As a result, landscapes create a critical exchange as space becomes a co-producer of interaction rather than a background of action. Curious minds open to learning from

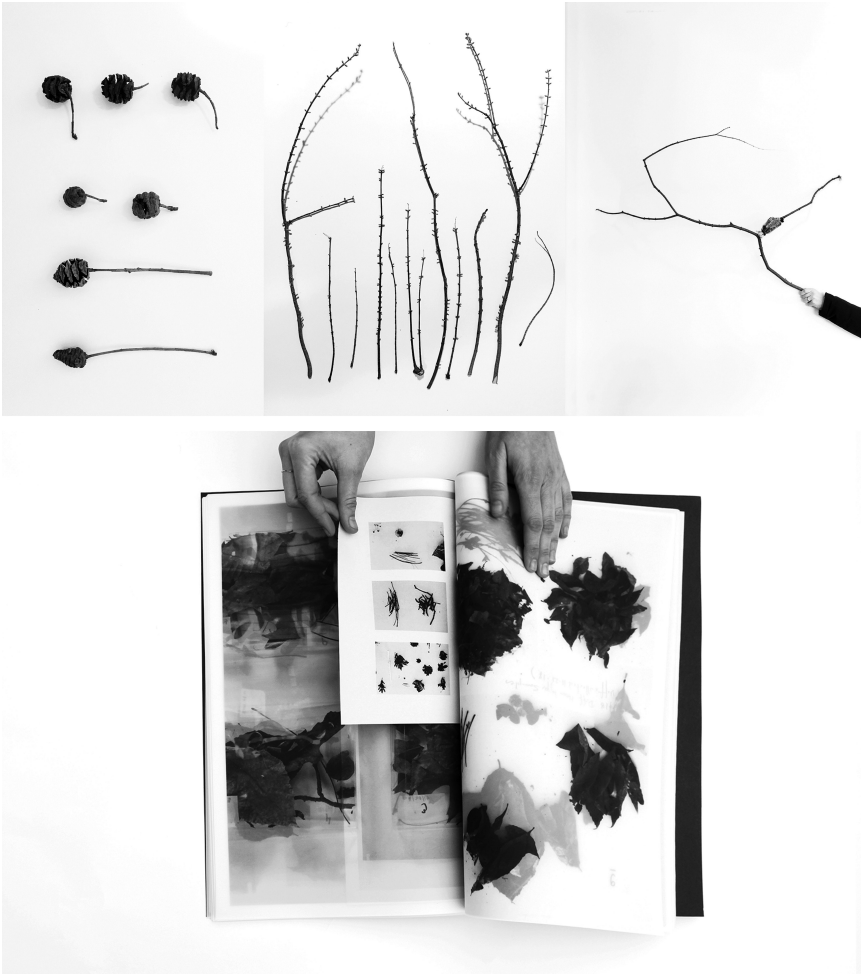


FIGURE 7.4 Top: Fieldwork practices move disciplinary theory to practical application through first-hand experience (2018). Armida and Aranza. Bottom: Curious minds open to learning from different formats and altered engagements (2018). Alcega, Benítez and Collard.

engagement simply because the ambition to study landscape embraces a world fundamentally indifferent to formal geometry. For instance, grasslands cannot be reduced to carbon sink statistics, million-tree projects cannot offset deforestation statistics and forests cannot be summarised for their timber resources alone. Rather, landscape holds non-material significance, which is no less “real” because it resists formal outlines. A more inclusive set of relationships bridges science and theory, humans and nature, culture and technology, because the thickness of the planet requires both thinking and doing. This inclusive ecology is political because it has no authoritative precedent, no imposition into social structures, and no a priori



FIGURE 7.5 One way to ensure science is not isolated is to expose students to creative studies of the living formation (2016). Rosetta S. Elkin.

scientist that has to remove herself from the experiment. I highlight that living stabilises political ecology, because “ecology” expands beyond nature-based issues, harmonising the insistence that human politics is the most prevalent transformative force. As a corrective, non-materiality substantiates the agency of ecology by articulating the concealed behaviours, slower advances and intelligence of living organisms that still produce tangible results.

For instance, the small flowering annual *Corydalis aurea* has expressed preference for dispersal by ants (myrmecochory) over humans. Experiments in deciduous forests show that black shiny seeds planted by ants produce 90 percent more seedlings than those planted by hand.⁵ The dispersal advances through manifold investments that promote movement, across openings in the forest floor, through gravel and duff, with intentionality. Proliferation is hinged on connections that do not have material form but emerge as discernible outcomes when the golden yellow flowers materialise each spring. Design emerges as a common ground between abstracted, theoretical space and physical, material space. What emerges is consensus, a model of political practice. Consensus is not only unanimity, it is the effort involved in creating reliable multi-agent landscapes.

Manifold species are appreciated by restless pedagogy, whether they are ephemeral, aggressive, transitory or otherwise. In other words, the changing

climate acts as a catalysing force to increase relationships, overcoming the deception of a “productive” species (an unfortunate label that might be retired for its exclusive claims of higher value to humankind alone). Non-materiality is established in recognition of cartographic informality (Figure 7.6, top) and the activity of the earth (Figure 7.6, bottom), and it challenges the distractions of data (Figure 7.7). Restless pedagogy teaches students to see beyond the most obvious encounters, grounding non-material value in the context of design.

If the structure of institutional education can overcome static pedagogy, then there is hope. The hope I am referring to encourages confidence in change, inspired by optimism for the future of the profession.

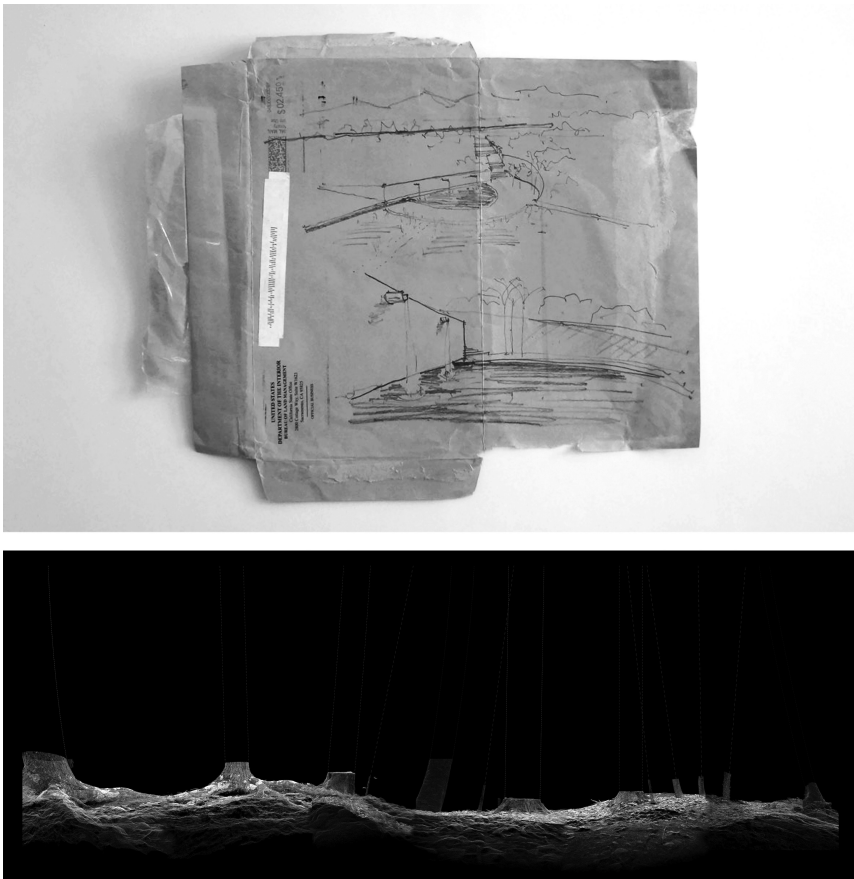


FIGURE 7.6 Top: Informal wayfinding across the US–Mexico border – design on Department of Interior correspondence (2015). Michelle Franco. Bottom: The temporal relationship between above and below ground (2017). Berdichevsky, Haines and Ling.



FIGURE 7.7 The critique of tangible evidence is explicated by an overwhelming amount of data, presented as a studio review (2018). Rosetta S. Elkin.

Opportunities enlarge in collaboration because students are no longer entering academia with a casual relationship to change. Rather, decades of crisis define their relationship to the failures of policy, the sluggishness of governance, or unrestrained and unequal urbanism. The lag of environmental regulation is no longer an excuse. Restless pedagogy is a counterpoint to the patchy acceptance of change and demonstrates to the next generation that we are not only “in” this together, but we inhabit the same earth. There is power in that acknowledgement, so restless pedagogy concedes that year after year the syllabus must change, the readings must change, the framing must change, the references must change, the methods must change, in order to begin healing our *dislocation* – *dis-* is a Latin prefix meaning lack of, apart, away, in a different location. The hope found in restless pedagogy is that it embraces kindred locations, is close and near because the precarity is more personal than ever.

Notes

- 1 Martin County Sludge Spill occurred after midnight on 11 October 2000. See, for instance, Peter T Kilborn, “A Torrent of Sludge Muddies a Town’s Future”, *New York Times* (1923–Current File) (New York), 2000.
- 2 The consequences of the designation “natural disaster” were critiqued shortly after the storm by geographer Neil Smith: <https://items.ssrc.org/understanding-katrina/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-natural-disaster/>

- 3 This disciplinary distance is articulated by Dipesh Chakrabarty in 2009, by mobilising the parallel discussions between globalisation and climate change, and the distinctions between natural history and human history: "The Climate of History: Four Theses" *Critical Inquiry*, 2009.
- 4 The United States has 311 million acres of agriculture protected by crop insurance. See for instance: <https://cropinsuranceinamerica.org>
- 5 Peter Thompson and Stephen Harris, *Seeds, Sex and Civilization: How the Hidden Life of Plants Has Shaped Our World* (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2010).