Other Wildernesses, Other Realities | A Framework for Shrinking Cities

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The Wilderness Idea

by Alyssa Goraieb
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Master of Architecture Thesis

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**Introduction**

It is generally understood in America that wilderness is place where nature exists in a pure and pristine state that is separate and away from the cultivated environment. This understanding can be at least partially attributed to the legal definition of wilderness in America; the Wilderness Act of 1964 determines wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” When we talk about preservation, we try to preserve a pristine parcel of land that is outside of the affect of humans.

However, there is no loner any place that qualifies as ‘wilderness’ by the definitions stated. It is now known that there is no such place that is unaffected by human beings in our globalized world. Even the most pristine parklands are infiltrated with electromagnetic waves and subject to global warming. Wilderness is at stake. But there is a future for wilderness when understood differently.

Wilderness is an idea. It does not exist as a place. The idea is culturally constructed and is one side of a dichotomy within nature, where on the other side is the cultivated environment. Wilderness is an anthropocentric attitude towards the world.

Since wilderness is an idea, then when we talk about preservation, we must talk about the preservation of the idea of wilderness.

In my thesis I first unpack what it means for wilderness to be an idea. The project lies in the exploration of what it means to preserve the idea though its architecturalization.

**Contention**

Wilderness is a culturally constructed idea. To preserve wilderness, we must preserve the idea of it. I propose that the architecturalization of the value systems that make up the several paradigms within the wilderness idea contributes to the preservation of wilderness, when understood as idea.

The thesis intends to primarily do two things. Frist, it is a lens to extract and distil the cultural meaning and values of wilderness. As well, the understanding of wilderness as idea allows us, as architects, to broaden our role when approaching issues of sustainability. We are tempted to build barriers around protected land and follow green building codes that contribute to sustainability. I believe that there is great potential in the rearranging of the wilderness rhetoric to provoke more generative design around the issues of preservation.
Research

Wilderness as idea is a complex concept. One reason for this complexity, ambiguity, and difficulty to define is a result of its varying nature throughout American history. The human relationship to wilderness has changed and constantly continues to change.

Because of its evolving nature, I chose to investigate the wilderness idea by dividing it into smaller paradigms. The first part of my project attempts to unpacl past, present and possible future paradigms and identify exactly the values, qualities, and characteristic of each. I’ve defined five (of a possible infinite) paradigms of the varying idea. For each, a collage was made as an early attempt to represent that paradigm in the research phase.

What I found from the investigation of these five identified paradigms is a value system of which wilderness is judged. I extracted and distilled values and notions, which are cultural and have specific qualities and characteristics.

Project

The project is the interrogation and exploration of how the value systems become architecturally realized in each of the five identified paradigms. The five paradigms manifest physically in siloed, contemporary projects – each which embodies the qualities and characteristics of the value system of the originating paradigm. For each, a new wilderness definition is produced, which is derived from the historical paradigm. The design is informed by a new set of criteria written to support the respective wilderness definition. It is intended that though its architectural manifestation that the values and characteristics of the idea are preserved. The five projects materialize physically as;

- The Isolated Paradise
- Hollywood Wilderness
- The National Park
- A Condition at Stake
- and, Autonomous Wilderness
Wilderness Act of 1964

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

PARADIGMS
Variations of the American Wilderness Idea
Variations of the American Wilderness Idea

**MYTH OF THE FRONTIER**

- The Myth of the Frontier: 
  - Edward嫌用: "Earth and its communities of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." 
  - Conservation Autonomously

**CONSERVATION**

- Conservation in Practice
  - William Cronon: "The myth of the vanishing frontier lay the seeds of wilderness preservation in the United States, for if wild land had been so crucial in the making of the nation, then wild land must remain untouched to preserve the American past." 
  - The Pastoralists

**AUTONOMOUS**

- wilderness is not pristine or untouched
- wilderness is left to evolve
- without human mediation

**Images:**
- Edward嫌用: "Earth and its communities of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." 
- William Cronon: "The myth of the vanishing frontier lay the seeds of wilderness preservation in the United States, for if wild land had been so crucial in the making of the nation, then wild land must remain untouched to preserve the American past."

**Illustrations:**
- Edward嫌用: "Earth and its communities of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." 
- William Cronon: "The myth of the vanishing frontier lay the seeds of wilderness preservation in the United States, for if wild land had been so crucial in the making of the nation, then wild land must remain untouched to preserve the American past."
Old World Roots
The perception towards wilderness in America begins with the attitudes brought by settlers from Europe. This attitude relies primarily on a biblical understanding of wilderness as a savage, barren, and desolate place. Wilderness is inhospitable and dangerous; the residence of the devil and things evil. Wilderness is always in contrast to the settlement. Biblically, the wilderness is in contrast with the Garden of Eden, where the Garden was once for Adam and Eve a worldly paradise, where humans can live naked without shame, living among animals and fruit bearing trees.
Romantic Wilderness
By the eighteenth century, the perception of the previously feared wilderness had evolved into a sacred and awe-inspiring terror. Wilderness became a supernatural landscape, where one was most likely to find themselves face-to-face with the divine. Through the sublime doctrine of theorists such as Edmond Burke, Immanuel Kant, and William Gilpin, wilderness was celebrated for its sacred, powerful and supernatural qualities. America’s first national parks; Yosemite, Yellowstone, Ranier, Grand Canyon, and Zion; all express the value system of the Romantics of which they judged wilderness.¹

Myth of the Frontier
In the second half of the nineteenth century many tourists sought out the wilderness as a spectacle to be looked at and enjoyed for its great beauty. John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, acted as a publicist for the wilderness and appreciation and nostalgia for wilderness became consumer culture. Theodore Roosevelt was an early preservationist though hunting expeditions that produced taxidermy specimens for the opening of the Smithsonian Museum.

Conservation
From Aldo Leopold’s Almanac to Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring, The Kyoto Protocol and Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth, environmentalism became a major attitude towards the Wilderness. Not only environmentalists but American society at large saw value in conserving it.
Autonomy
We may be on the brink of understanding wilderness though its autonomy. In autonomous wilderness, wild is not synonymous with pristine or virgin. Rather, it is free from human purpose, utility, or design. It is not requiring the absence of all human effect and can persist in environments that have been altered or continue to be influenced by external human factors such as climate change.3

PROJECT
**OLD ROOTS**

- "Paradise Lost" by John Milton
- William Gilpin

**ROMANTIC WILDERNESS**

- "picturesque" "powerful" "sublime"
- "pictures" "awe" "terror"
- "picturesque" "compositional" "picturesque"

- Henry David Thoreau
- Preservation of wilderness as sanctuary for man
- John Muir in the Sierra Nevada

**MYTH OF THE FRONTIER**

- "powerful" "picturesque" "pictures" "picturesque"
- "picturesque" "compositional" "picturesque"
- "picturesque" "picturesque" "picturesque"

- "picturesque" "picturesque" "picturesque"
- "picturesque" "picturesque" "picturesque"
- "picturesque" "picturesque" "picturesque"

1800-1830: Indian Removal Act by President Jackson

1850-1862: Yosemite

1869: "America's first wildland park"

1872: America's first National Park - Yellowstone

"The Geographical Distribution of Animals" by Alfred Russel Wallace

"The myth of the vanishing frontier lay the seeds of wilderness preservation in the United States, for if wild land had been crucial in the making of the nation, how many more must now be lost forever as the American frontier moves on, leaving wilderness as a commodity."

Frederick Jackson Turner: "The frontier is gone and with its going has closed the first period of American history."
The Myth of the Frontier

Primitivism

Conservation Autonomously

Old Roots Romantic Wilderness

Mountain as Cathedral

1800 1830 1700 1667

"Paradise Lost"

John Milton

1850 1862 1864

America's first wildland park

Indian Removal Act by President Jackson

Yosemite

1869

John Muir in the Sierra Nevada

Sierra Nevada

Henry David Thoreau

Preservation of wilderness as sanctuary for man

Frederick Jackson Turner on national renewal:

Owen Wister

The Virginian

Elite tourism

Anthropocene international preservation

Wilderness is not pristine or untouched

Wilderness is left to evolve without human mediation

Theodore Roosevelt

"manly qualities"

1872 1872

1909

1912

1906

1893

America's first National Park

Yellowstone

"public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the American people"

1964

Wilderness Act, USA

"an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain"

1949

Aldo Leopold writes The Land Ethic

The Geographical Distribution of Animals by Alfred Russel Wallace

"the myth of the vanishing frontier lay the seeds of wilderness preservation in the United States, for if wild land had been so crucial in the making of the nation, then surely one must save its last remnants as monuments to the American past—and as an insurance policy to protect its future."—William Cronon

1889

1881

Smithsonian — Roosevelt African Exhibition

21,151 natural history specimens were collected for taxidermy exhibits at the Smithsonian Museum

1757, Edmond Burke's A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful

"The frontier is gone and with its going has closed the first period of American history."

Bill McKibben's 1989 pronouncement of "The End of Nature, "
Embodied is the preservation of a physical duality between an ideal paradise and a wilderness that is unknown, but thought to be inhospitable.
Derived from the attitudes of Old World Roots

Wilderness definition:
a largely unknown, yet savage and inhospitable surrounding which threatens the cultivated and idealized paradise

Preservation criteria:
Boundary: must create a full enclosure for the separation of the garden from the wilderness
Boundary: must account for all preservation systems, including artificial lighting, water circulation and treatment, gardening maintenance, the expulsion of dead organism to the beyond, the fabrication of waste containing capsules, and exit docks
Wilderness: unknown, inhospitable, threatening
Garden: Idealized, natural, artificial, protected, supported, pleasurable, delightful, paradise, climate controlled
Wilderness is aesthetic scenery carefully curated through the composition of natural objects and landscapes. It is an optical device; it uses one point perspective and is experienced through the frame.
Derived from the attitudes of Romantic Wilderness

Wilderness definition:
an aesthetic experience carefully curated through the composition of natural objects and landscapes

Preservation criteria:
Constructed through optical devises including forced perspective, one point perspective, picturesque techniques, frame
Viewed through a single point
Viewed as a natural landscape
Hide optical construction tools
Should include a background, midground, and foreground with objects
Viewed through any of: frame, image, window, camera, screen
Valued scenery: rugged landscapes, impression of wild animals, circulation from foreground to background, which creates a perceived/projected human experience
The Wilderness embraces consumerism and becomes a destination for tourists to playfully experience. It is a place for outdoor recreation, and a spectacle to view specific wilderness objects – including animals, waterfalls, mountain peaks and glacial valleys.
Derived from the attitudes of Myth of the Frontier

Wilderness definition:
a destination to see and consume nature away from the city. It is a
constructed cultural experience place to experience nature and its great
beauty

Preservation criteria:
A place for outdoor recreation: rock climbing, hiking, scenic views,
nature trails, row boats, fishing, relaxing in the great outdoors, hunting
Visitors only - expulsion of native communities
Characteristics of the wilderness landscape: mountains, valleys,
canyons, plains, waterfalls, lakes and rivers, animals
Fragmented pieces of nature. Objects and experience vs ecosystem
Comfortable, spectacle, enjoyable, domesticated (bathrooms, shopping,
parking)
Boundary: a decided extent with which contains the checklist of
fragments
WILDERNESS RECREATION

There’s tons to do in the Wilderness. Choose from hiking, canoeing, swimming, sailing, water skiing, pedal-or motorboating, horseback riding, as well as from sporting activities like baseball, basketball, volleyball, or horseshoes. It’s just across the lake, with three 18-hole championship golf courses nearby.

For a more relaxing pace, explore wildlife along winding nature trails. Ride around the campground in an E-Z Go electric cart or aboard the Wilderness Line, an authentic, narrow-gauge steam railroad. Children’s play areas are located throughout the campground as well as at a Petting Farm with friendly goats and fuzzy baby chicks.

Right near the rock climbing wall in the High Peaks, there rests a spot where you can splash, slide and shoot your way into an old-fashioned swimming hole upsilon different ways. Take a rib-ticklin’ glide down a spiraling 260-foot slide. Sail through the air from a rope swing. Navigate a raft on a winding journey down the rapids. Jump from a rock diving platform or just soak up some sun along the golden beach. You can enjoy a whole day of water adventures, all for one River Country admission ticket.

VITTLES AND RESTAURANTS

A stacked ham sandwich from the deli, a snack bar lunch, a buffet dinner, or home-cooked bacon and eggs over a campfire. At the Settlement and Meadow trading posts, you’ll find a tempting variety of delicates—sen foods plus a selection of home cookies’ grocery items as well as camping gear or any other equipment you might need. Buffet breakfasts, lunches and dinners are served in the Roosevelt’s Picnic Blanket Café and at Ansel’s Trail End Buffeteria, and the Campfire Snack Bar is always the spot for a quick lunch or evening snack.

WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN

At dusk, the fun begins at the campground with a musical “Hoop-Dee-Doo” dinner show of handclappin’, foot-stompin’ entertainment served up with barbequed ribs, country-fried chicken, corn on the cob and hot apple pie. It’s family entertainment that means bring the young’uns, too. Reservation required (up to 60 days in advance).

CAMPSITES WITH PRIVACY

Surrounded by trees for privacy, each campsite comfortably accommodates as many as seven people. The nightly rate per site is $18 plus tax, and includes a charcoal fireplace, a 110/220 volt electric outlet, a picnic table, water, waste container and sanitary disposal system. A special area has been set aside for tent campers, too. Nearby are airconditioned comfort stations with private showers, ice dispensers, laundry facilities, restrooms and telephones.

FLEETWOOD TRAVEL TRAILER RENTALS

Here’s luxury in the Great Outdoors — your own Terry Travel Trailer built by Fleetwood elegantly furnished, fully carpeted and air conditioned, with color televisions, AM & FM radio, cookware, linens, plus daily housekeeping service. For a nightly rental rate of $60 plus tax, up to six people will feel right at home in total comfort.
A Condition at Stake

Management of a fragile ecosystem

Valued is the preservation of a designated holistic ecosystem. It not only about the nostalgia for a pristine place being lost, but also as a resource for the health of the planet and for mankind's survival on it. As a data-scape, wilderness is monitored, mediated and compared over time.
Derived from the attitudes of Conservation

Wilderness definition:
a large area of undeveloped natural land, untrammeled by humans
where man is a visitor who does not remain. In the face of changing
conditions, an existing or previous condition is valued. Value is that it
exists not for enjoyment, but for the health and survival of the planet.

Preservation criteria:
Ecosystem health is determined at certain numerical values
Maintenance/tracking of: number and type of wildlife/tree species,
land cover, biodiversity, groundwater levels, soil acidity and microbial
content
Protected from pollution, disease, fire, and adverse human affect
Monitored with results compared over time
Boundary: open or closed determined by monitoring agency – open
to biologists, ecologists, geologists and other agencies who support the
conservation effort
The National Park Service is required by law “to preserve” park resources and the values and purposes for which the park was established, as well as “to provide for the enjoyment” of those resources and values by such means as will leave them “unimpaired for future generations.” You can help us by obeying the following regulations:

- Camping outside designated sites, at sites for which you are not permitted, or within 100 feet of a water source is prohibited. Digging a trench or leveling the ground is prohibited.
- Food, garbage, cooking gear, and other odorous items must be suspended at least 10 feet above the ground at night and when unattended.
- Carry out your trash; if you pack it in, pack it out.
- Bury human waste at least 100 feet from a water source, campsite, or trail. Putting items other than human waste and toilet paper in composting or pit toilets is prohibited.
- Bathing, soaking or swimming in water entirely of thermal origin is prohibited.
- Polluting or contaminating any water source (with any soap, waste, food, etc.) is prohibited.
- Tossing, throwing, or rolling rocks or other items inside caverns, into valleys, canyons, or caves, down hillsides or mountain sides, or into thermal features is prohibited.
- Bicycles, wheeled vehicles (except wheelchairs), and operating motorized equipment in the backcountry are prohibited.
- Feeding or intentionally disturbing wildlife is prohibited.
- Collecting or disturbing natural features, plants, rocks, antlers, cultural, or archaeological resources is prohibited.
- Impeding or disturbing horses or pack animals is prohibited.1

The autonomy of wilderness is preserved. New relationships may begin to form within the ecology by the forces affecting it – new species may evolve, some may go extinct. What is important is that wilderness must remain autonomous, without human utility, intervention or design.
Derived from the attitudes of Autonomy

Wilderness definition:
a designated zone not without human affect but left alone to evolve

Preservation criteria:
Boundary: blocked only to humans – animals/pollution/fire may cross
Wilderness must not be mediated or managed
Can be affected by humans, including global warming and pollution
Can be on an affected landscape
New relationships may form within the ecosystem to include the changes caused by humans.
New toxic ecologies may emerge. For example, a keystone species that is artificial, or an ecosystem reliance on an invasive affect (such as plastic)
Figure 1. Thesis Prize Jury exhibition box
Figure 2. Thesis Prize Jury exhibition box lid


Projective Ecologies, edited by Chris Reed and Nina-Marie Lister. ACTAR, Harvard Graduate School of Design; 2014.


