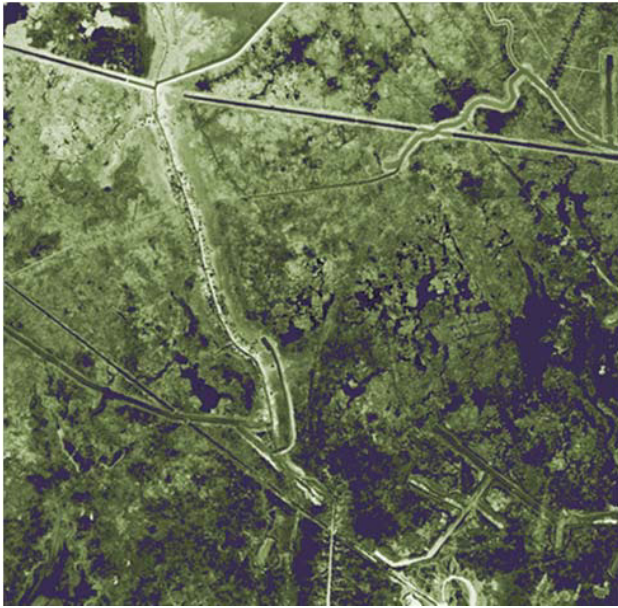

REFLECTION

Floortje van Sandick / 4145240
Design as Politics / Armina Pilav / Mike Emmerik / Gilbert Koskamp



Isle de Jean Charles 1963

https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/article_da3cfd6f-7e69-57e9-a040-5262767a3ba2.html



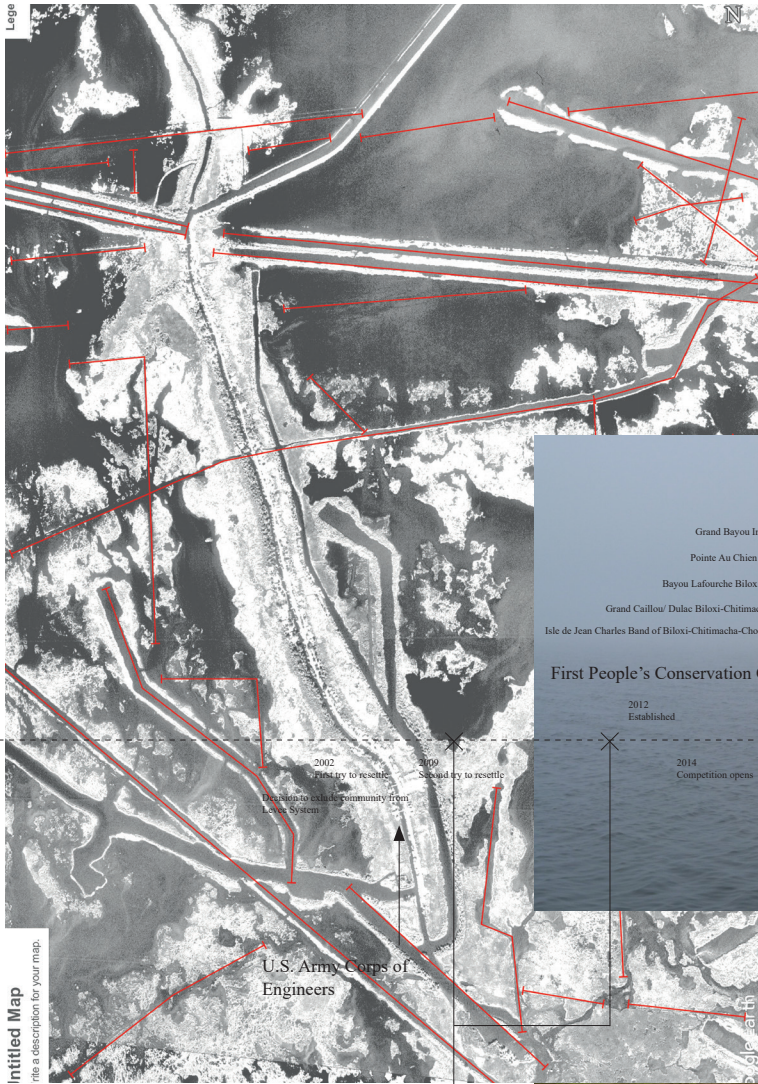
Isle de Jean Charles 2008

During my graduation process I have investigated the Louisiana wetlands as a site of erasure and possible resistance. The Louisiana coastline is one of the fastest declining coastlines in the world, erasing a unique ecosystem and displacing communities. This land subsidence is caused primarily by the drilling of pipelines and canals by oil and gas companies that causes salt water intrusion, but also through climate change induced sea level rise. I chose this location since it is one of the few areas in the world where the guilty or perpetrators (the oil and gas industry) and the victimized (the people and ecosystem of the wetlands) intersect.

My project focusses on this shifting frontline of climate change. Every day Louisiana is losing more and more of its coast. The line between land and water is continuously shifting further inward, erasing communities, homes, and ecosystems. Currently, this affects mostly very small communities, living deep in the wetlands, but with the constant shift of the line, larger cities like New Orleans and Houma are at risk of being completely exposed to the sea (including its violent hurricanes), exposing large populations to flooding and destruction.

The Louisiana coast is faced with double violence. The incidental peaks of the hurricanes (like Katrina in 2005) and the slow incremental violence of land loss. Because the violence caused by hurricanes is so visible and extreme, the slow dangers of land loss are not occupying peoples minds outside of the small communities that are directly confronted with it. My project tries to highlight this incremental violence of land loss, by giving voice and visibility to the erasure that the communities at the frontline are faced with. As a case study I investigated Isle de Jean Charles, a small community of 30 households on the edge of the landscape which has experienced 98% of their lands being lost and are now faced with relocation.

Through designing and constructing this frontline in a literal sense, the project tries to bare witness to the incremental changes in landscape, and address the urgency imagining a Louisiana coast beyond oil. It tries to be a protest project against the oil industry as well as a test site for collaborative alternatives.



The story as evidence assemblage. Trying to construct a narrative from different pieces of information.

Grand Bayou Indian Village
 Pointe Au Chien Indian Tribe
 Bayou Lafourche Biloxi-Chitimacha
 Grand Caillou/Dulac Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw
 Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians

First People's Conservation Council

2012 Established

2014 Competition opens

2016

CBI
 Pan American En-
 Concordia



Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians

Proposal Louisiana State National Disaster Resilience Competition (NDRC) \$1 Billion

Louisiana state funded \$92,629,200

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Lowlander Center

The First Official Climate Refugees in the U.S. Race Against Time

A Native American tribe struggles to hold on to their culture in a Louisiana bayou while their land slips into the Gulf of Mexico.



Partners
 Planner selected
 CBI
 Pan American En-
 Concordia
 Rockefeller Foundation
 HUD

ON METHOD, RESEARCH, DESIGN

Considering I am within the studio design as politics, before even starting to define my method, I had to understand both what the role of an architect could be and what is the potential of a building. Believing that both taking position as an architect and the ideas and designs you produce are inherently political, the choices you make concerning method, design, your own position, should be in relation to your political positioning. Being a feminist activist myself, I wanted my methods, research and design proposal to experiment with embedding these individual core values into architectural practices. I positioned myself and ways of practicing in a way as proposed by DAAR, stating: “We envision our practice instead as an attempt to produce a space from which it is possible to operate in the here and now but with radical long-term transformative visions.”¹ Borrowing from them, I aim to create a project which is embedded in the here and now, dealing with real context, real people, real challenges, but with the freedom to be radical in pursuit of a different, alternative future.

The aim of the research phase of my project was to understand this ‘here and now’. The method I used was borrowed (but later transformed to the specific conditions of my project) from Forensic Architecture. They describe buildings not as static entities, but rather as entities that are undergoing dynamic transformations and material deformations as response to changing environmental force fields. This makes buildings and their environment sensors of societal and political change and into media which make the information readable. Buildings can therefore be part of counter forensics, articulating public claims using architecture. Since my sites of investigation are rural areas, I extended this idea of building as sensor, to the entire environment as sensor, and tried to read both the landscape and its structures and people, as sensors or evidence.² For this idea I used the notion of the land as palimpsest, as described by André Corboz, storing traces of the past and try to read them³.

The readings of the landscape can be collected in what Forensic Architecture calls “evidence assemblages”⁴, collections of evidence files (ranging from surveys to digital models, animations, memories, maps, etc). Within my project I try to create these evidence assemblages. This resulted in the reading of my site as a collection of different types of evidence. It tries to create a narrative, connecting different pieces of information from different sources. Within my project this was done by combining different types of research, resulting in different pieces of information, which could collectively tell a story. I analyzed google maps images throughout time, collected news items that were written, visited and photographed different communities on the frontline in Louisiana, and conducted interviews with a range of experts from different fields and political areas as well as members of the communities. Together I could sketch a story of the realities of the ways of living in Isle de Jean Charles and the different types of violence and erasure they are confronted with. Simultaneously, I created ‘evidence assemblages’ of precedents and projects that inspired me, or collected and transformed materials as well. This resulted in a collection of four expanding working books, documenting architectural references, artistic references, materials of my case study, and design sketches. These four books became the basis for my design process, whilst continuously updating themselves as well.

As forensic architecture describes as well, from understanding this specific case (or incident as they call it), it is then possible to use a cross scalar approach to try and uncover the long-term history and transformation of environment over time⁵. Similar to this, I

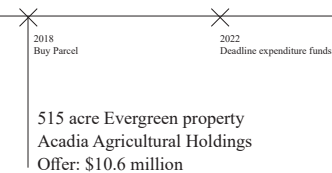
¹Petti, Alessandro, Sandi Hilal, and Eyal Weizman. *Architecture after revolution*. Sternberg Press, 2013. p.15

²Weizman, Eyal. *Forensic architecture: notes from fields and forums*. Hatje Cantz, 2012. p.18-56

³Corboz, André. “The land as palimpsest.” *Diogenes* 31, no. 121 (1983): 12-34.

⁴Weizman, Eyal. *Forensic architecture: notes from fields and forums*. Hatje Cantz, 2012. p.58

⁵*ibid*



→ CSRS Inc

Resettlement Project



The four books / evidence assemblages
(photo by author)

try to read the specific site of Isle de Jean Charles as one of the incidents and relate it to other sites on the frontline in Louisiana I've visited, to collectively create an overarching story / counter narrative. This collective story of erasure, resistance, and adaptation than informed my design.

As a method to move from research to design, I tried to understand how to combine the specific small scale of Isle de Jean Charles, to an overarching system, connecting each story/site to the other. Following Keller Easterling, I tried to move to a design which contained both active form, as well as object form⁶. Designing a system, with multipliers, which can evolve, expand, and resist. I used the four evidence books as information on both the system and the formal aspects of the design. These four books were essential, since many of the projects I collected were Land Art projects. In the end this gave me the courage to move my project away from designing a building, to focusing on designing a landscape.

⁶ Easterling, Keller. *Extra-statecraft: The power of infrastructure space*. Verso Books, 2014.

Moving from research to design was complicated. Deciding to take a completely open-ended approach and build your design from the evidence collected, created quite a long transition between research and design. Dealing with the topic of erasure and the natural counter mechanism of preservation through the notion of evidence collection, my first design solution was that of an archive. Later on in my process this proved to be too literal and I had to reflect on my original starting point. Rereading the notion of Forensic Architecture of the building as witness and sensor, I realized I needed to reframe my design from a building as an archive of evidence to a building as evidence in itself. To do this, a change in scale of the structure was necessary and the project shifted from to design of a building, to the design of a landscape as evidence. In this sense both my method of research and my original starting point came together and the design became an experiment in dealing with a erasing landscape, resistance, preservation and memory. Looking back, the method I chose was successful, but can be much improved. In future projects I would still start for creating 'evidence assemblages' but would find a more focused more organized way of documentation and preservation. I found myself often scrambling for pieces of information I knew were somewhere, but weren't archived well by me, so I couldn't use them. In future project I hope to develop a consistent method for collecting and translating into a story.

Also, the method I use is completely open ended. Picking this methods, means that you base your story on a fascination and go from there, without presumptions about what you will find and therefore also without ideas on what your design will be. Therefore, one of the risks of this method is that you will not know what you will end up with and whether it will have value, which leads to a very unsure process. It also takes extra time, since you follow leads and take turns that in the end prove to be a direction you don't want to take.

The project is relevant to the field of architecture in multiple ways. Considering that the architecture field is still relatively conservative, the project contributes by positioning itself as explicitly countering political systems (in this case capitalist notions and the oil and gas industry) through the tool of architectural design. It tries to see the potential of the built form as aiding the already existing resistance to systems that damage both the environment and the communities. It explores how architecture can work as a witness, as a sign or symbol, as a host, a network and as a memory trace. Four capacities build-

ings can hold to help aid people and communities to create and remember their lived realities and create counter narratives which can rebalance systems that try to erase them. The project tries to imagine an architectural structure which can connect different communities facing similar issues concerning land loss to tell a collective story and create awareness and resistance. Through this it is an effort to implement the idea of architecture as both object form and active form, as proposed by Keller Easterling. It tries to show that architecture can be a tool of political awareness and change. Furthermore, the method of creating 'evidence assemblages' both of the site itself as well as theoretical frameworks and reference projects, can be a tool useful in similar projects.

Moving to P5 I will try to develop methods of representation that aid the narrative of the project. I hope to develop models and drawings that make visible the political dimensions and potentialities of architecture, the tools I used to deal with a landscape of erasure, and the mechanisms of the space. I hope to show that a design can be both architecture and activism.

DESIGN AS POLITICS AND ETHICS

The project is positioned within the studio Design as Politics, with a collective theme of migration. Design as politics is of course focused on the political systems and structures that are connected to design. It also understands that not just a design is political, the methods you choose are as well. Therefore, understanding that each student has to find his/her own position, no prescribed methods are given, and a student is completely free to come up with his/her own methods as well as design brief and location. The topic of this year's studio was migration, a topic which is very broadly interpretable. Within this topic I made the decision to focus on climate change, since it is expected it will be one of the main forces that pushes people into forced relocation. Understanding migration in relation to the theory of Doreen Massey on power geometry, I decided to focus on the idea of forced migration as movement without power. This entails that people move because they are forced not because they want to. Therefore, my project started at the root. Why do people have to move in the first place? I decided to focus not on the destination (since this is not where the issues lie), but on the place left behind and why this is happening. Taking the wish to stay as a starting point, I tried to understand the dynamics that come with the decision to stay or to go, the value of home and community, and how to help small communities raise their voice to give them more tools to possibly stay or at least not be completely erased.

Within the studio you get the chance to select your own design mentor. Therefore, each student has a personal mentor team, with one mentor as part of the studio (research mentor) and one from outside (design mentor) and a building technology mentor. This was very valuable to my design, since each mentor offered a completely different angle of looking at the project. Therefore, each tutoring session offered different perspectives I wouldn't have had if all mentors had come from the same chair. Tutors were especially important since they offer a more distant look at the project and see value and opportunities you yourself have overlooked.

Ethics are especially important within the notion of design as politics. It makes the role of the architect come to the foreground. Within the project there was (still is) a constant risk to speak for people, instead of giving tools to let them tell their own story. Furthermore, there was a constant ethical dilemma of focusing on helping the community versus focusing on creating awareness about the oil industry on a larger scale to a broader audience. How to get this message across without hurting the people who's story you are using? Furthermore, there will always be ethical conflicts in operating in a context that is not yours. It helps that this is an academic project and can therefore be viewed as a more abstract tool or experiment in developing the notion of architecture as political instrument, rather than trying to be a savior to this specific community.

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