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Geostories Book Review- author accepted manuscript version
Journal of Architecture, 2019

Design Earth (Rania Ghosn and El Hadi Jazairy),
Geostories: Another Architecture for the Environment

We live on a perilously disturbed planet. Human societies have destabilized the Earth system through an acceleration of fossil-fueled activities. It is now a time full of fears of the sky falling and the world ending. The unfolding disaster in some ways is the narrative: written on the Earth in a script of extinctions, tsunamis, wildfires, floods, garbage gyres and meltdowns. And in this time of climate crisis and toxic complexity—some call it the Anthropocene—humanity is expected to not simply prepare for alternative futures but increasingly to design them. If the Anthropocene is a troubling story told to try to make sense of the calamity-ridden world we find ourselves in, it is also a story we would do well to heed. And yet it is a story we seem to be intent on ending badly.

This is where Design Earth come in. They ask, ‘If we are worried once again that the sky may be falling on our heads, how is it that we have done so little about it?’ (p.11). Their aim is to tell new stories, or rather *geostories*. Design Earth is a collaborative design practice founded by Rania Ghosn and El Hadi Jazairy. Their book *Geostories* explores the cultural potential of stories and speculative design fictions as the space for alternative ways of engaging with a rapidly transforming world. As they explain, ‘The “what if” approach of speculative fiction is a design method to configure new and largely uncharted kinds of living on a damaged planet’ (p.21). *Geostories* collects their works, each story comprising politically incisive text and playfully subversive drawings. Design Earth’s ‘manifesto for the environmental imagination’ responds to Bruno Latour’s dilemma when faced with the Anthropocene: ‘The Earth, has become once again... an agent of... our common geostory. [...] The problem becomes for all of us in philosophy, science or literature, how do we tell such a story’ (p. 13). And if the Anthropocene is geostory writ large, it calls attention to the ways in which cultural imaginaries are being shaped by, and are shaping, the sense of the world as no longer a stable entity.

For *Design Earth*, stories matter. They quote Donna Haraway, ‘It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories’ (p.22). *Geostories* is presented as a mode of storytelling for the present: ‘we need to learn to tell other stories, inhabited and contested’ (p. 15). In Haraway’s terms, this is a way of ‘staying with the trouble’. And stories matter in troubled times because life—or Ursula le Guin’s ‘unending story’—matters (p. 21). Stories also offer the potential to rethink life on Earth in terms of coexistence. A quote from Gregory Bateson accompanies an image of ocean life: ‘Thinking in terms of stories does not isolate human beings as something separate from the starfish and the sea anemones, the coconut palms and the primroses.’ For Bateson, ‘thinking in terms of stories must be shared by all minds...’ for evolutionary processes are also ‘the stuff of stories’ (p. 88). By its own account, ‘*Geostories* aims at a new eloquence in representation—one that models how to assemble the big picture of the Earth’ (p.23). The geostories that Ghosn and Jazairy offer are in search of ‘holistic representation’, in the way that Alexander von Humboldt put it: ‘people want to see... and I show them a microcosm on a sheet of paper’ (p.20). The multiscalar permutations, from microcosms to the cosmos, structure the sections of the book as *Terrarium*, *Aquarium*, *Planetarium*. These are miniature worlds that are revealed by meticulous drawings of accumulated strata and future fossils, trapped resources and organisms of the deep oceans or the unruly ‘motions of the heavens’. And yet this encapsulation is also contradictory; a caption fragment notes, ‘Architecture seeks to contain a world whose transformations exceed all attempts to contain it’ (p. 84).

The stories they tell are indeed complex and contradictory, ‘simultaneously comprehensible and fantastic’ (p.19), as befits a troubled and troubling world. Like so many stranger-than-fiction tales, *Design Earth*’s geostories veer between news accounts, fantasy, and horror. These are hybrid shape-shifting stories, modern day myths that are at times amusing, sometimes disturbing. ‘After Oil’ renders a future for the Persian Gulf in which the world has transitioned from fossil fuels and is built on its detritus. It builds artificial mountains as byproducts from oil drilling, makes the Strait of Hormuz the site for a giant real estate chess game and Bubiyan Island a sinking archipelago of wildlife islands as an alternative to current Kuwaiti megaprojects. ‘Of Oil and Ice’ starts with the true story of Saudi Prince Mohammed Al Faisal’s 1976 madcap scheme to tow an iceberg from Antarctica to Jeddah to

provide fresh water. The tale and the project is revised: a giant Dam is constructed at the Strait of Hormuz to hold the meltwater from icebergs, a spectacular performance of Antarctica's vanishing act. 'Airpocalypse' is a chronicle of the consequences of industrial pollution where a 'million inhabitants of Beijing appear to be engaged in a citywide rehearsal for life on an inhospitable planet' (p.131). 'Cosmorama' takes up an astronaut humanity's ventures in outer space: asteroid mining, planetary arks and repurposing middens of space debris.

In many of the stories, politically charged global events are a spur to the imagination of alternative and fantastic futures: Sputnik's launch in 1957, the 1973 Arab oil embargo, the end of the Persian Gulf War in 1991, the US 2015 SPACE Act for commercial exploitation of space resources or the anticipated renegotiation of the Antarctic Treaty in 2048. *Geostories* draws attention to the way in which the expansionary dynamics of capitalist industries has seen the extractive frontier constantly redefined. Moreover, existing (and unenforceable) international laws, treaties and protocols created to assuage such tendencies have assumed relatively stable conditions and geographies. Responding to the shifting conditions of the Anthropocene, from changing coastlines, to species migrations and extinctions, requires finding wholly new ways of navigating the climatic and geopolitical *terra incognita*.

The terraforming tales borrow architectural icons and typologies as building blocks for their irreverent subversions and inversions of techno-optimist things to come. Boullée's Pantheon, Tatlin's Tower, the Empire State Building, Superstudio's Continuous Mounument or Buckminster Fuller's domes, maps and circuits are all put to work populating a 'theater of the world' (p.24). The references are frequent and obvious (at least to architects). More interesting than the deployment of readymades are the ways in which the storytelling intervenes in cultural imaginaries. Like Superstudio's 'Cautionary Tales' before them, they occupy dissonant human-geological-technological systems. Geostories simultaneously invoke other stories of a world gone awry: the flooded London of J.G Ballard's *Drowned World*, *Chinatown's* depiction of California's water wars, or even the biblical story of Noah's Ark.

Design Earth explain their storying infrastructure: ‘a geostory nests in references to both architectural precedents and environmental histories (some Matryoshka-esque and others more turducken-like) to highlight ghosts and echoes in the relationship to both technology and the environment’ (p.24). Geostories are imagined through an intimacy with incommensurable times and scales, frighteningly dynamic entities, technological entanglements and ecological precariousness. Their purpose seems to be endurance, just like the nested stories of *Tales of the 1001 Nights*. With their interwoven complexity and aesthetic diversions, are these geostories intending to somehow forestall the cataclysm that threatens the Earth? Will their readers and listeners indeed begin to care and respond?

What seems to be at stake here is developing modes of speculative design that act as precautionary fictions. These are experiments in paying attention to the strange realities and hazardous conditions emerging from a climate-changed world. Such geostorytelling does not simply describe alternative worlds or propose solutions to climate catastrophe. Instead, its narrative provocations suggest recalibrating ways of coping with the end of the world as we know it. *Geostories* is thus a challenge to rethink architecture’s responses and responsibilities, when faced with the spectre of an uninhabitable Earth, that go beyond the usual mitigation and adaptation strategies. This anticipatory infrastructure seeks to work with cultural shifts and futures that are unknown and uncertain. It is by turns scary and astonishing, delightful and baffling. Design Earth’s hybrid storytelling architecture is an invitation to an imaginative realm that relies on being inhabited by many others. As Design Earth acknowledges, stories ‘are also a matter of experience—of telling and re-telling’ (p. 20).

Geostories is an intriguing compendium of Design Earth’s speculative architectures—drawings, writings and artefacts—until now mostly disseminated through exhibitions. Images from *After Oil*, their entry in the Kuwaiti Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 2016; *Pacific Aquarium*, in the Oslo Architecture Triennale 2016; *Trash Peaks*, in the Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism 2017; and *Blue Marble Circus* in the Boston Design Biennale of 2017 occupy the final section. Most recently they exhibited this work as part of *Dimensions of Citizenship*, the United States’ Pavilion at the 2018 Venice Biennale. Yet these are all unfinished and unfinishable stories. There will never be a unifying or reassuring narrative conjured up by a world falling

apart. Nor will there be an operating manual that will help to fix it. Design Earth's approach is rather to indicate the myriad contradictory stories that can be told about this unsettling juncture. *Geostories* invites a consideration of interactions that are mutually shaping for futures that are bound up with the realities of an increasingly damaged planetary home. The hope is that Design Earth's *weltengenschaft*—world landscape—can help prompt a richer cultural dialogue about a climate crisis whose burden is not equally shared. It will be interesting to see what further re-tellings they have in store. What next?