Consuming Danger, Signifying Danger: Postnuclear Monuments, Museums and Gardens

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Marked by the scientific discovery of atomic energy, the nuclear age, which spans the twentieth century, has changed the nature of culture as well as the landscape.[1] Despite recent talks on nuclear disarmament, the dread of nuclear arms production, proliferation, and waste storage is pervasive at both global and local levels, haunting governments, communities, and individuals alike. Nuclear sites concern not only scientists and politicians but also environmental designers. The need to evoke a cultural discourse, protect future generations, reveal or conceal radioactive burial sites, and recycle retired installations engenders the participation of artists and designers. How do designers intersect with these hellish places? Do we have a potent role in addressing this conundrum? In what follows, I confront the consumption and design of today's most daunting places – the landscapes of nuclear and radioactive material production, processing, testing, and burial.

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VAST SECRET LANDSCAPES play host to nuclear arms and commercial energy producers – whether the notorious factories of Rocky Flats in Colorado, the phallic 'Minuteman' and 'Peacekeeper' intercontinental ballistic missile silo fields of the Midwest, the vast million-gallon underground tanks storing radioactive waste on the Hanford Reservation in eastern Washington, the bombed-out deserts of Nevada, or the hidden and spoiled ponds of New England.[2] These immense geographies, our relics of the Cold War and idols of power, evoke attraction and fear at once. Consumer passion for extreme experiences, coupled with government public relations efforts, creates new species of tourist destinations and entertainment landscapes: atomic museums, atomic national historic landmarks or national historic parks, and even atomic-related national wildlife refuge/nature reserves.

The first part of this essay examines the cultural phenomenon of 'danger consumption' embodied in atomic museums and landmarks across the United States. The second part reviews the role of artists and designers in this paradoxical undertaking, particularly designers who mark the danger sites, making them publicly safe and accessible, or who fashion 'monuments' and parks. The role of design and art is further examined using the submissions to the 2001 Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Plutonium Memorial Contest, which highlights a range of philosophical, interpretive, and design approaches to creating a memorial to America's storage of the lasting, glowing poison. A third section analyses in particular detail the work of a group of photographers who bring images of these restricted areas to light. Finally, the essay's conclusion considers the designation of nature reserve/wildlife

refuges in and around nuclear sites and the design of parks on decommissioned atomic reservations.

These landscapes of power and poison play a critical role in contemporary cultural imagination, both reflecting and nurturing a new raison d'être and image of nature. What should designers do with hundreds of thousands of acres of retired Cold War follies? Could bombed-out landscapes become opportunities for creative endeavours, thus underscoring the global reality of both productive and destructive energies? Would memorials atop burial sites remain our lasting monuments and protect future generations? Would nature preserves in and around nuclear production and waste sites merely sooth our environmental guilt, or might they elicit the drama and conflicting realities of these new and challenging frontiers?

NOTES

1 Radioactivity was discovered in 1895; the atom bomb was first tested and put to military use in 1945. The words 'atomic' and 'nuclear' are used here interchangeably.

2 In the Unites States today, there are more than 20 million acres of military bases (including military-owned and privately operated facilities and testing grounds).