

BUILDING A WILDERNESS WITH LOUIS LE ROY

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Louis' living room has all the traces of an old man with an obsession: books, photographs, odd objects that may have been gifts from admiring fans.¹ It is a dark room, but in a bright way, with a wall-sized window looking out onto his garden, which is not really a garden. Louis and I have periodic conversations every few weeks while I stay nearby in Heerenveen, where I work at the Kennedylaan location and in the original Ecocathedral at Mildam, near where he lives. I once worked in Sydney as a gardener at a hostel where rural cancer patients stayed while they were being treated and I recognize his frustration at not being able to work, which I saw in the old farmers at the hostel. When Louis and I talk, his constant admonition is 'just do it.' Yet, because of his age and injuries, we are

OPENNESS pp— 35, 44, 52, 57, 73,
81, 103, 107, 136, 140, 148,
170, 175, 186, 188, 216

IMMERSION pp— 47, 60, 65, 104,
136, 141, 146, 149, 160, 171,
175, 200, 214

forced instead to 'talk about it.' He is a natural talker, and his work at the Ecocathedral is so interesting, because it is a very banal and thoughtless activity while at the same time it is a very abstract intellectual project. Louis and I like each other even though when I am with him he refers to me in the third person as 'the stupid Australian.'

It is easy to describe the Ecocathedral: it is a whole lot of piles of bricks in a forest. When he started in the early 1980s, Louis' block was empty pasture land with a building on it. Somehow he managed to convince the local municipality to dump truckloads of masonry on his property that would otherwise have ended up at the tip. From these tipped piles Louis began elegantly arranging the bricks without using mortar to create what have been called 'tables.' Apart from the dumping, Louis' work has been unassisted by machines and he uses few tools, relying instead on the **labor** of his body. The gaps in the table form the **microclimates** that facilitate **spontaneous vegetation**, though garden plants have also snuck in, or rather have been sneaked in. It is called an Ecocathedral because it operates ecologically — that is, it has ecological effects — and a cathedral because it is ultimately authorless and will take a long time to finish, if that can even be accomplished, like the old cathedrals of Europe. Overall, the appearance of the Ecocathedral is that of a ruin or an archaeological site set in a forest. The site is mysterious. A sign at the gate says 'Enter at your own risk!' in Dutch.

When I first met Louis and talked to him about the ideas behind the Ecocathedral, he was adamant that I should come again and work there, since he saw the tables as artifacts arising from a **practice** rather than having architectural or formal qualities in their own right. Since his tables were very beautiful, and others were

quite ugly, I thought he was being disingenuous but he would say 'that's just how I like to build them, and they are stronger that way too.' He emphasized that all he did was place one brick and then place another. The tables were not designed, they were made. The banality of the Ecocathedral is that it takes a lot of this 'placing one brick and placing another' business to make a table. The tables take time and you must give them that time. Indeed, it is the time spent repetitively, meditatively *doing* that is the Ecocathedral, which is why it is referred to by the Time Foundation (Stichting Tijd, in Dutch) — the foundation that manages it since Louis' death — as 'the Ecocathedral process' rather than simply as a location where the Ecocathedral object resides.

If the doing is banal, even boring, perhaps the intellectual basis of the project arose from all the time available to think while one is stacking. That is something I recognized from my time working as a gardener when I was a young man, setting up a steady meter to pace myself so I could do physical work all day. Counterintuitively, the Ecocathedral is all about **economics**, and therefore about **labor** and productivity. As a proud Huguenot, Louis believed in hard work and the potential of the human body to make things. As such, he was critical of mechanization and the monetization of **labor** that amplify capabilities, and rates of exchange that skew the value of time, both of which he felt distance people from what their bodies are capable of.

Even while he had the Protestant work ethic, he was by temperament an anarchist. In line with that, it was vitally important to Louis that the Ecocathedral be functionally useless and worthless in terms of **economic** value, because thereby all attention is focused back onto the person and the environment. A person building at the Ecocathedral must let go of the idea that they have a purpose, since their work

ITERATION pp— 46, 60, 82,
105, 129, 216

CARE pp— 49, 59, 87, 93, 130,
171, 201, 217, 220

TRUST pp— 35, 123, 125, 142,
148, 151, 173, 175, 185

does not contribute to something that can be paid for. In doing so, they are liberating their **labor** from monetary value and when they take their **labor** out of the **economic** system they can see it for what it is really worth. They will know what they can do in an hour and what an hour's work feels like in their body. (Considering that many of the people I met from the Stichting were white-collar workers, this laboring dimension reminded me of *Fight Club*, where beta-males tried to toughen up.)

Periodically after I had visited him, I used to send Louis postcards of wilderness from Australia. I did this because he hated them. Looking at photos of pristine natural places, he used to tell me that he thought they were 'ugly,' because they didn't have any people in them. On the surface this might seem to contradict the *laissez-faire* attitude to spontaneous vegetation that surrounded, and indeed constituted, the Ecocathedral. But this too linked back to Louis' **economic** model. Though liberated from profit per se, Louis still saw what he referred to as a 'return' on the investment of **labor**, which reflected **thermodynamics**. Since energy is transferred through the process of entropy, the process of building transfers this energy to the environment through the creation of **microclimate**, resulting in prolific **growth**. For this reason Louis saw the Ecocathedral's beauty, both conceptually and aesthetically, as a collaboration between humans and nature. He wanted to see the interaction between both 'players,' which is why he thought the Australian bush was ugly. I retorted that this was a very Dutch approach, which I knew would make him bristle a bit.

Louis was very suspicious of architects and planners, and by implication landscape architects like myself. Speaking of the Dutch, he was critical of how they feel compelled to control every square meter of the country, which he saw as almost pathological. Louis used to say,

'You must leave a gap.' Like most ideas at the Ecocathedral, the notion of the gap was simultaneously literal and metaphorical. Without mortar, the bricks in the crafted stacks had small gaps between them that allowed them to operate more effectively as **microclimates** and also to work better as habitat for plants and animals, the gap being for nature.

In planning terms, the metaphor of the gap was a place that was out of society's control, outside the **labor** cycle, valueless, simply ecological. Members of the Time Foundation were trying to establish a type of land use called 'Ecocathedral Process' in the land use zoning plan for the Netherlands, specifically for this purpose: a buffer strip where a resilient natural system could operate outside the **economic** and productive land use system. In the face of the sense of control the Dutch needed to have, these 'gaps' were important for the psychology of the country as much as they would be valuable ecologically. Ironically, despite his anarchic tendencies, he was (as a female friend would say) 'a man of his generation,' a patriarch who wanted to be listened to and idolized, and who really wanted people to do what he told them. Luckily, he was also very smart and charming and full of good ideas. Even while I should 'do what I want' at the Ecocathedral, he kept trying to direct me to work on a skyscraper that would take generations.

Since the Ecocathedral was a case study for my doctoral research, when I was there I undertook measured drawings of one table complex called 'the Pinnacles.' Showing my crisp CAD drawings to Louis, he asked, 'Is this drawing accurate?' I started to reply before I realized that it was a hypothetical question. Getting up, Louis walked to the large window, which had a spectacular collection of colored glass in front of it, through which light reflected kaleidoscopically around the room. Turning a glass object around, he moved a beam of light around the room,

commenting, 'I just cannot get this right!' By using the glass in this way, Louis was providing a critique of the act of drawing and representation.

Time flows on its own. If there is a slow practice, it is to work *in* time. By seeking to engage with processes in representation we are always behind the curve of what is really happening, speculating on what *might* happen, rather than what is happening. Le Roy's practice of building is a reminder for architects and landscape architects that what we make is material. It is real. By placing 'just one brick, then another,' something emerges that is in synchronicity with the world, rather than a representation of it.

SOME DEFINITIONS

Thermodynamics

The 1st law of thermodynamics is that 'nothing is lost,' which relates to the 2nd law 'disorder increases.'² Key here is the idea of 'exergy,' which is roughly 'useful energy.' While energy is not lost, as it becomes disordered it changes into a state that is not useful to the original purpose. For example, for the steam engine, from which thermodynamics was first developed in the 19th century, as heat is exchanged with the surrounding environment, more fuel must be provided to maintain a useful temperature. The term disorder refers to this lost exergy that occurs as a result of the state change of energy to a less useful form. Here we see an emphasis on energy that is anthropocentric, since even after the state change, the energy is still there, doing something, just not what we wanted it to. Le Roy's approach is interesting because he aimed at and encouraged this transfer of energy, since all the 'value adding' of the project arises from it, notably its ecological effects.

Economics, Labor and Productivity

Economics, according to the current dominant approach, is a non-material abstract system that has no real agency in the world apart from effects that arise from modifications that people make to the world on the basis of property ownership, itself an abstract system. In economics, productivity aims to get more profit for less expenditure. Economics focuses solely on its own limited, uniform gains, just as thermodynamics focuses only on exergy, ignoring the energy departing the 'useful' part of the system.

Le Roy liked to use the terms of economics 'against itself' by applying them instead to the thermodynamic effects that arose through the transfer of energy, which otherwise economics would regard as negative because it seems to reduce those effects by focusing on specific economic outcomes. Le Roy liked to brag that despite having no economic value, his work at the Ecocathedral got an enormous return on labor, which is referred to in economics as 'productivity,' because out of small amounts of human labor he helped a sophisticated and bio-diverse ecosystem develop. In effect Le Roy was arguing for an economics based on literal thermodynamics, not abstract readings of the world based on human utility.

Artifacts and Practices

Practices are repetitive, skilled actions that people undertake in real time, learning through a recursive process of doing, refining and doing again.³ While practices have an outcome, emphasizing the term keeps the focus on the process of doing. Though practices are dynamic, artifacts result from practices but are static. 'Artifact' is different from 'outcome.' The term artifact is used in photography and scientific experiments as something that has arisen

due to the process rather than being the subject per se, perhaps a smudge on the lens. The relationship of practices and artifacts is interesting in thermodynamic terms because thermodynamics occurs in real time, whereas, an object that is inert and static, like the stacks of bricks at the Ecocathedral, has discharged its energy into its surrounding environment. Through undertaking a practice, humans discharge their own energy into the moment of configuration of the inert thing, though when completed, the object also no longer contains the energy, which has then moved on again into the environment. Treating the Ecocathedral 'tables' as artifacts rather than objects emphasizes the practice of making them, which was always Louis' focus.

The Gap and Microclimate

While they may arise as artifacts from practices, once the practice has ceased the artifact is an object that exists autonomously from the practices that made it.⁴ Contradictorily, even though artifacts have discharged their energy in thermodynamic terms, the object continues to have ecological effects long after, notably on microclimate. Microclimate refers literally to the 'micro' climate, the difference of the boundary layer climate along its surface and the larger earth climate in which it is situated, measured in terms of temperature and humidity, where temperature affects moisture levels due to evaporation.⁵ This difference in temperature between the microclimate and the broader climate can be significant enough to change species diversity. At the Ecocathedral, the techniques and configuration decisions of building that arise from practices encourage diverse microclimatic effects, such as the inclusion of 'gaps' between un-grouted bricks, which allow the collection of air blown

particulates that act as soil as well as seed that collects in them. These gaps allow the effects of making to continue long after the energy to make them has been discharged.⁶

Growth and Spontaneous Vegetation

The Oxford dictionary defines 'growth' as 'the process of increasing in size' but also as 'the process of developing physically, mentally, or spiritually' and these two definitions converge when thinking about growth at the Ecocathedral. While plants grow, people also grow at the Ecocathedral, in a dynamic relationship with the environment, their actions affecting each other as building locations are set in relationship to developing plants, the techniques themselves foster growth through the microclimates created and the gaps left, and people's techniques and appreciation of the Ecocathedral as a meditative activity increase over time. Growth is the unifying criteria for the collaboration of culture and nature at the Ecocathedral. The term 'spontaneous vegetation' has developed in ecological literature, which removes some of the stigma of the term 'weeds,' as unwanted plants.⁷ Since there is ostensibly no planting at the Ecocathedral, the development of spontaneous vegetation there is key to Le Roy's notion of real productivity. It is for spontaneous plants that the inert material of bricks forms a garden: these plants are not weeds, and it is because they are welcome that the Ecocathedral is really a garden.