Project Description

Like many who have entered into the study of landscape architecture in the past few years, I am both enthused and perplexed by the expanding domain of the field. I struggle with the the idea of designing at the large scale of dispersed natural and engineered systems, though I recognize the importance of this approach. The central dichotomy for the landscape architecture department at the GSD strikes me as that of strategies based in large scale systems against those based in human experience. Of course the stated ambition at this institution and elsewhere is to harmonize these elements, but for me there are still a lot of unanswered – maybe unanswerable questions about recognizing and embedding meaning in large scale design. Far from a detriment to the field, this problem helps set landscape architecture apart in the design disciplines in that functionality and meaning are extended in distance and time, but resolving these relationships into something legible is no easy task. The greatest challenge – one that I am excited to see many at the GSD tackling – is the need for new forms of representation to help engage and orchestrate human experience over this extended field.

This notion of extent is what initially drew me to Siberia. Depending on one's definition, the largest continuous land-based ecosystem in the world, the slow ebb and flow of Siberia's tundra, taiga, agricultural land, and urban regions have major impacts on planetary ecology because of the sheer size of land area in play. I was especially interested in Siberia's mythic association with immensity and remoteness. I wanted to understand that degree of extent as a way of being in the landscape, to test if one could really ascribe a singular experience to such a scale. There is, I realized, one large-scale system at work in Siberia that contains within it both the logistical framework and the historical background to support my fact-finding mission: the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

My research on the Trans-Siberian Railroad brought me to two precedents that would define the parameters of my trip and research. First, I came across an article attached to the website of the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg describing the recent restoration of an 850 meter long drawing executed by Russian artist Pavel Pyasetsky at the end of the nineteenth century (www.hermitagemuseum.org). Payastsky was tasked with documenting the landscape of the railway, then in its final stages of completion, from Moscow to its eastern terminus in Vladivostok. His research consisted of traveling the route multiple times by train or other means. The drawing was the main

element of a mechanized panorama shown at the 1900 Paris Exposition, variously titled *The Great Siberian Route,* which also included 3 additional layers of scenery spooling at different speeds to simulate the effect of motion parallax. (Other sources credit the studio of French artist Marcel Jambon with the final painting (Herbert, 111).) The French rail service company with the contract for the actual Trans-Siberian cars, Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits, sponsored the exhibit, providing visitors with a simulated train compartment and dinner service.   The many-days journey was compressed into highly romanticized thirty minutes. Presumably, *The Great Siberian Route* also advertised to the developed world the extent of the Czars territory and Russia's growing interests in the Far East, which had been the main reason for expediting the completion of the rail line.

Bookending *The Great Siberian Route* in time, my second precedent is a joint project of Google Maps and Russian Railways to stream prerecorded but real-time video of the entire train trip from Moscow to Vladivostok, georeferenced to a Google Maps interface (http://www.google.ru/intl/ru/landing/transsib/en.html). I found this application deeply seductive, and in time I began to see it as part of a trend in which networked geographical media begins to recover a place for the body of the viewer, the best example of this being Google Streetview. This seemed to have a direct bearing on the systems-experience dynamic in landscape architecture. Moreover, Google's "virtual journey" is essentially a moving panorama, functioning in much the same way as *The Great Siberian Route.* The means of representation for this vast landscape system had come full circle to a technique that had reached its pinnacle in the late nineteenth century.

I proposed to undertake the journey from Moscow to Vladivostok on the Trans-Siberian myself, comparing the experience to what I knew of the potential for representing the vast territory it demarcates. I had hoped to see *The Great Siberian Route* in person, and included a visit to the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg in my travel itinerary, but after tracking down the curator responsible for the piece, Galina Aleksandrovna Printseva, I was told that the panorama was not to be unrolled again in the near future. Having recently been digitized, however, *The Great Siberian Route* will soon be reproduced in print and on CD in a publication authored by Galina Aleksandrovna. Nevertheless, I embarked on my trip with panoramas on the brain, my main practical question being, how does one go about editing a panorama? Because the entity known as "Siberia" must of course be compressed in order to take any legible form; once by the artifice of the railroad itself and then again

through the chosen means of representation. Pyasetsky distilled the space into a discrete set of iconic views. Google edits for clarity and user convenience, omitting nighttime views that are essential to any real Trans-Siberian trip and allowing virtual travelers to skip to destinations along the route at will.   I was curious as to the representational techniques that would strike me as fitting my personal experience, which would, from the outset, be mediated by my need to sleep, eat, and converse; by delays, weather, seasons, biological or mechanized actors in the landscape, daydreams, and so on. I armed myself with a sketchbook, a digital camera, a sound recorder, Russian-English dictionary (I took some Russian in college and tried to brush up before leaving), and the seventh edition of Bryn Thomas's *Trans-Siberian Handbook.*

My plane arrived St. Petersburg, via Moscow, on Monday August 8th, 2011. The following day I explored the city, including the Hermitage, before leaving on an evening train to Moscow. The Moscow-St. Petersburg line predates the Trans-Siberian, and I considered it a prologue to my journey; I used the trip – luxurious in single compartment – to accustom myself to scrupulous sketching, note-taking, photographing, and recording. I detrained before sunrise in Moscow, and spent the next day and a half sightseeing. At 1:30 in the afternoon on Thursday August 11th I began my Trans-Siberian journey in a 3rd class carriage on the number 340 train to Irkutsk. The 340 is not a tourist train; most passengers travel relatively short distances, so my neighbors turned over frequently. I charted the arrivals and departures of my cabin-mates along with the specifications of my compartment in my sketchbook as I recorded the passing landscape. City, village, dachas, field, birch copse, rail yard, train station: this pattern would dominate the first half of my trip and much of the second. The repetition and relative consistency of the landscape over thousands of miles is the most defining characteristic of the swath of Siberia carved out by the railroad, intensified by the Soviet rooted standardization of the rail infrastructure itself. The same palette of pastel colors adorns nearly every station building. The result is that the landscape, even in experience, feels compressed and localized. As expected, my life on the train and my own sense of passing time and space was inseparable from my representational mission.

I left the train in Irkutsk, roughly the halfway mark and a popular stop-off for travelers, and spent the next two nights in the tourist-friendly village of Listvyanka on Lake Baikal (another icon of bigness). Returning to Irkutsk for the last night of my interlude, I boarded the number 2 train, the famed

eastbound "Rossiya" for Vladivostok at 8:00am, Thursday August 18. Better suited for long-distance trips, the Rossiya was faster and more comfortable than my first train; my second class ticket found me in a private compartment with a friendly family. Rounding Lake Baikal, the way out of Irkutsk is as brazenly spectacular as the preceding landscape is quietly and relentlessly impressive. Soon the old pattern reasserts itself: city, village, dachas, field, birch copse, rail yard, train station. Pine and spruce forest become more prominent, the terrain somewhat more rugged, and new types of shrubs and weeds appear. Still, as impossibly remote as I should have felt this land to be, as exhausted as I was from traveling, I had trouble conceptualizing the extent of space that I had traversed and set out to describe. Early in the morning, Sunday, August 21st I left my train in Vladivostok, having logged more than 5750 miles from Moscow ten days earlier.

Upon returning to the GSD in the fall I continued the research that had brought about my trip, using Guliana Bruno's class, *Film, Modernity, and Visual Culture* to help me frame my experience and ideas within existing theories of mechanized perception. I was particularly interested in Wolfgang Shivelbusch's concept of the "machine ensemble," which describes a category of vision where the body's interface with the landscape is mediated by the mechanism of the train (ref). The "machine ensemble" was the basis for an installation that I created as a response to my trip and the ideas that came out of it. Having been convinced that the physical vehicle allowing a viewer to perceive large territories becomes a essential to that mode of perception, I built an abstraction of a type of convertible bunk common on Trans-Siberian rail cars. I had begun also to see text and narrative as a method of representation with relatively untapped potential in landscape architecture, and a parallel emerged between the extent of space that I was trying to represent and the growing library of texts that supported my efforts. I built into the bunk a space for this personal library to act as a kind of non-Cartesian panorama. I included theoretical texts, novels, art books, guides (including the *Trans-Siberian Handbook*), and – a panorama within a panorama – a book of nearly 1200 photographs from the train window chronologically documenting my trip. The installation was on view at the Center for Government and International Studies at Harvard as part of the student organized *Travel, Traversal* exhibition from March 21 to April 7, 2012.

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