

# *A (future) archive of a since disappeared land*

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“Dormant” describes plants (and other life forms) that are temporarily asleep, blooming and flowering at different times of the year. I explore temporality through the notion of dormancy in plants during the long winter months, when their regular physical functions are suspended or slowed down for a period of time. Dormancy points toward the depth of the landscape, histories that are just hidden out of view—in a deep sleep, rather than dead. It also points to the treatment of land that appears derelict before it blooms through architectural practices of site analysis and site reading prior to building.

Looking to define and explore concepts of *tactile history*, *feeling history*, and *feeling the land*, I consider a site in Streetsville, Ontario. Formerly farmland, the lines and ridges of a history of labour are still physically evident on the site, just before its redevelopment. These histories: the death of agriculture, immigrant passage and settlement, and Anishinaabe cultivation around the Credit River (running just behind this site), although physically hidden, can be felt. With redevelopment processes underway, the distant history of the site—a physical, affective and visceral history—will be





kept even further away from the centre of our bodies, undetectable both on the physical site and in the museum as a space to materialize memory and history. I created a piece to explore the tension of archiving, attempting to preserve or document the feeling of moving across the ridges of a disappearing land. I sought to parallel the motions of moving through microfiche documents in the museum; moving through the images in a linear fashion metaphorically parallels walking alongside the agricultural ridges of the land, but at the same time asserts its distance from this haptic, embodied experience by structuring and fixing time.

The concept of dormancy also begs the question: which histories are memorialized and which remain undocumented? How are these histories represented in museological spaces? Abbas Akhavan's piece *Study for a Glasshouse* (2013) addresses these questions by unearthing and reclaiming stories of settlerhood. As a site-specific installation at the Peel Art Gallery Museum and Archives (PAMA) in Brampton Ontario, it directly engages the architecture of the archive and unsettles the very structures that govern it.

Built as a "greenhouse," or vitrine, the display case contains a paper archive from the PAMA collection documenting the social history of the rose in the Dale Estate. The history of Brampton, Canada's "Flower town," becomes part of the Canadian collective imaginary and identity. The paper reproductions include images and texts that document the rose, highlighting the colonial history of the Dale Estate. They bring into play questions about the commodification of the rose, the colonial framing of nature, and land as a topic of study. The reproductions are laid out at one end of the display case, and the plant types at the other, each one labelled with their etymology. The vegetation types are each carefully chosen native species growing under ideal conditions throughout the duration of the exhibit, slowly corrupting the impermanent and fragile paper representations.



In my own practice, native plants represent a felt history, while invasive species speak to a narrative of movement and travel, pollinating and surviving in hostile environments. In anticipation of an imminent erasure I create pseudo-field guides, which take precautionary measures of preservation (as gifts) of reciprocal exchange between people and the land in the past and the future. Through taxonomic studies of plant life, invasive and native species become a vehicle for dialoguing between scientific, measured and meticulous studies, and those that are historical, political, nuanced, ephemeral, and temporal. Using small scale pencil drawings, I intimately engage with the intricacies and details of the plants and their etymologies—revealing and paralleling the poetics of movement, impermanence, and cyclical weathering patterns that demand patience: a slowing down of the process of *building*, *siting*, and *cultivation*.

The movements of settlerhood: (in patterns, ephemeral by nature) leave a subtle impression/trace on the land;

### ***Land is Archive is Dwelling.***

Milkweed is represented in drawing as its pollen is transported by the wind: a narrative of movement, crossing between the temporality and rhythms of written gesture, and immigrant and Native narratives of (un)settling.

Histories of colonization are subtly present as traces in a landscape that has been occupied, shifted, and distorted by new inhabitants and social structures, yet not often emphasized in museological or institutional spaces.

By intervening in the aesthetics of the vitrine and its mechanisms of display, not only does Akhavan's installation highlight the impermanence of the archive and the precarity of conservation practices, but also critiques the very notion of a collection—including its underlying power relationships and colonial structures. These gestures intervene in practices of collecting and taxonomy, as part of how we remember and forget histories of settlerhood that are connected to location and place. I ask, then, what is a reified understanding of site specificity and site, in a nomadic context? And further, how does one cultivate a sense of familiarity while challenging the notion of a 'sense of place' as one bounded by location?

### ***Erasure;***

I draw connections between the "glasshouse" in the title of Akhavan's piece and the history of the glasshouse in modern architecture. Akhavan's investigation of the interplay between hostility and hospitality in "domesticated landscapes" is mirrored in the opposing forces at play in the modern architectural typology of the glasshouse: on the one hand the glasshouse provides a sense of permanence and protection, and yet, the domestic, intimate and private spaces are



on display, opposing the notion of the home as a place of refuge. The history of modern architecture tends to place its emphasis on how buildings become like art objects in space, planted on site without concern for context, existing apart from the natural landscapes that host them. [1]

The modernist typology of the glasshouse is de-rooted from its context, and stands as a permanent and pristine structure unaffected by its surrounding natural and changing landscape. That disjuncture, where context is understood as secondary to man-made concepts of 'genius loci,' goes hand in hand with the colonial project. A form of erasure has to take place before the architect can conceptualize the site. Place then *becomes* site: a violent obliteration of history and memory, a mathematical understanding of the land that relies on boundary and measurement (Beauregard 2005). Following this, there is a sense of place imposed on the site as a commodity, the way its developers make it seem more attractive, wherein it becomes an abstracted symbol for meaning of place (casting a wide net of marketability). Architect Carol Burns, in her essay "On Site," describes the politics of erasure in site practices:





"The idea of the cleared site is based on an assumption that the site as received is unoccupied, lacking any prior construction and empty of content. It posits space as objective and 'pure,' a neutral mathematical object... The disregard for natural constructions betrays the presumption that they are politically and ideologically immaterial..." (Burns 1991, 150)

How does one cultivate a sense of familiarity while challenging notions of a sense of place that propagate the prominence of 'locus,' or 'spirit of place' in architectural discourse? 'Spirit of place' is often unconnected to socio-cultural and political specificity, and takes on an idealized and romanticized view of place, such as how the primitive hut has been taken up in Western architecture and phenomenology. Ideas of spiritual connectedness to the landscape in phenomenology are problematized by varying cultural concepts of 'location,' spirituality, and cosmology. In the case of modern architect Philip Johnson's idea of the glasshouse, the overarching concept of the 'locus,' which views nature as wallpaper, conveys a sense of purity by creating continuity between inside and outside.

The glasshouse in architecture history is a poetic gesture that marks the landscape with large and heavy brush strokes, a search for architectural purity that results in violence on the land and erasure of context. Akhavan's work breaks apart architectures of the archive and acts as a potential space to reinvent memory, proposing another version of the 'spirit of place.' Working with processes of archiving in artistic practice I examine histories that fold onto the land and accumulate over time, which allow for gestures of decolonization and re-thinking processes of recollection from within the spatial archive. Dormancy allows for the recovery of those

histories, bringing forth the question of memorialization and the materiality of memory in museological contexts to gather the dimensions of temporality in the land, and its histories of dwelling. I want the projected image (in tension with the material and archival slide) to evoke a (future) archive of a since disappeared land, and thus to make felt the potential for this land's erasure in the future. This projected future is conveyed as light, immaterial and tangibly felt.

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