

# Preface: In the Briar Patch

*To ask, How can one escape the market? is one of those questions whose principal virtue is one's pleasure in declaring it insoluble.*  
—Jacques Ranciere

Environmental ecologies and market economies have always been entwined; such that “sustain” and “develop” present not opposing but interdependent forces. If anything, the portrayal of these ideas as a zero sum game in which collusion or refusal are the only option is probably a mistake in thinking.

Ecologies, economies and politics are frequently theorized as if they had an elementary particle with extensive powers to organize. For Marxist analysis the elementary particle is labor. For some classic forms of economic analysis, it is utility. Some contemporary political economists have constructed arguments that reject these in favor of commodified power as the building block. The technocracy movement of the 1920s in the US promoted energy units. For cyberneticians, the particle was information. In contemporary theories of a digital gift economy, a utopia is spun around non-market, peer production. In territorial analysis of the globalizing world, realist, liberal, neoliberal or noopolitical theoreticians have insisted on parsing the “necessities of history” with everything from states to region states, to civilizations. Management culture aspires to universal rationalization through procedural standards. Environmental theories adhere to the atmospheric and economic chemistries of carbon. The Bouvard or Pécuchet in all of us is kept occupied with many such examples.

Theorizing the elementary particle, however mistaken, is, with its ready rewards and recognition, a durable strategy. The unified theory, as an all or nothing proposition, bumps off the previously popular elementary particle with resolute one-upmanship. The elementary particle frequently encourages notions of recursion and self-organization yielding, for instance, an invisible hand, a Gaia or a homeostatic system. Indeed, steady-state conceptions of environmental and cybernetic ecologies have become paradigms for market economies in mutually reinforcing utopias. For some forms of activism, it may help to establish a realm of proper activity within which to declare not only non-conforming particles but enemies and innocents. For the most ambitious, the elementary particle has an added bonus: it is so annoyingly persuaded, and the ground around it so littered with contradictory evidence that it is both attractive and easy to refute and so garners much attention.

Those for whom the testbed is space can frequently only see a blizzard of elementary particles in collision at every scale. Many things that are most easily theorized as virtual packets are, in fact, very heavy, spread out over square miles of development and accompanied by technological remainders or obdurate politics. Administrative layers are lumpy and braided with no clear hierarchy, and while their accretion is theorized to blur state boundaries, those entities remain crisp and even multiplied by various proxies. The utopia of digital non-market, peer production meets political and infrastructural obstacles that prevent it from reaching some of the most populous areas of the world. The enclosures that the profession regards as formal objects have become active forms—physical, spatial medias and technologies moving around the world as information.

Despite the lure of the elementary particle, the space of mismatched particles is, for the sly practitioner, a good briar patch. There will always be designers who are attracted to the lure of unified theories, who want to make “pictures” of networks and who want to wire every bird and leaf to every tree. In this sense, “sustain,” if it means preserve, would be synonymous with death, not life. The greater political power naturally lies not in fixing organizations but operating in the mongrel space between them and recognizing attributes of how they change—not knowing what they are but what they are doing and what object forms and active forms they need to fuel their change. Unlike many designers who are trying to devise the single most soulful expression of themselves, most entrepreneurial players in most economies or ecologies selfishly survive by figuring out how to keep the desires of others continually changing and ready to absorb more products, more life and more information. While the atmospheric and biological imperatives of contemporary environmental thinking might seem to suggest interest in land or landschaft, the last thing that an inventor wants is a conventional architectural



Image courtesy Ralph Hockens

site. They rather want their forms to circulate, propagate and travel beyond to multiple sites. While the utopian theorist must be allowed to remain right, the resourceful practitioner, flush with the abundances of the briar patch, might become an unexpected and powerful cohort.

The essays collected in this volume seem to be offered in this spirit.

**Keller Easterling** is an architect and writer from New York City. Her book, *Enduring Innocence: Global Architecture and its Political Masquerades* (MIT, 2005) researches familiar spatial products that have landed in difficult or hyperbolic political situations around the world. A previous book *Organization Space: Landscapes, Highways and Houses in America* applies network theory to a discussion of American infrastructure and development formats. A forthcoming book, *Extrastatecraft*, examines global infrastructure networks as a medium of polity.

