Introduction.
Making Ground: The Archaeology of Waste Landscapes

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Upon a Waste Landscape

From the conference rooms of the second floor of the Chicago Hilton – the location of the session from which this forum emerged¹ – one can gaze across Grant Park and out to Lake Michigan. All the land in front of you is made from waste; the area that became Grant Park (ca. 130 ha, 312 acres) was “reclaimed” from the lake during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An initial strip immediately in front of the hotel received hundreds of thousands of tonnes of the ruins of old Chicago after the fire of 1871, while even more came from the refuse of the rapidly growing city and excavated spoil from its vast construction projects (Cremin 1999). This vast, artificial

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¹. The 2022 Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology. Many thanks to all the participants and attendees for their contributions.
landscape made from heterogeneous dumped waste, now forming an important part of the recreational space of the city (though originally appropriated from the Indigenous people of the area), embodies the complex origins and the generative potential of waste materials and the possibilities of the archaeology of waste landscapes.

Waste creates and reshapes our contemporary landscapes in many different ways. Often, such landscapes are regarded negatively as places to avoid if possible: garbage dumps, sewage infrastructure, mine heaps or, at smaller scales, rubbish-strewn streets or plastic-choked waterways. That said, given the variety of materials that make up different waste landscapes and the degree of intentionality involved in their deposition, some waste landscapes can go surprisingly unnoticed. For example, land reclamations using waste rock or rubble can come to be mistaken for “natural” terrain after decades of familiar use (e.g. Byrne 2017, 42). In other cases, waste-modified landscapes, such as industrial spoil heaps, are seen as eyesores and removed or reshaped better to resemble natural landforms. Whether perceived negatively or not, waste landscapes can nonetheless sometimes become social, material, ecological, creative and politically generative terrains, allowing opportunities for new activities and valuations to take place. It is the investigation of these complex associations and the valuations of such waste landscapes that the papers of this special issue of the Journal of Contemporary Archaeology address.

Context

In recent years there has been significant work on waste materials and waste disposal across contemporary archaeology from many different artefactual and theoretical viewpoints. While this builds on the important early work of Bill Rathje and colleagues (Rathje and Murphy 1992) the field now encompasses a broad and globe-spanning range of contexts including the intersection of waste, class and identity (e.g. Papoli-Yazdi 2021); the role of waste management and disposal in modernity (Graff 2020); waste produced in conflict (e.g. Breithoff 2020; Farstadvoll 2022); nuclear waste (Joyce 2020); waste and migration (De León 2015; Dezhamkhooy 2023); ecology of industrial wastes (Stewart 2022); multi-species interaction with landfills (e.g. Figura et al. 2022); ship ballast as itinerant waste material (Burström 2017); seaborne drift matter and the Anthropocene (Pétursdóttir 2020); and the toxic effects of settler-colonial mining (Lawrence et al. 2023). Waste is also increasingly recognised as a form – and by-product – of heritage (Ross and Angel 2019, Harrison 2021), even when materially or socially toxic and unwanted (Holtorf and Högberg 2016; Bangstad 2022; Kryder-Reid and May 2023).

While such work is extensively drawn on by our contributors, no edited volume or special issue has examined landscapes entirely made from waste or otherwise predominantly characterised by waste as a unified topic (however, see Quivik 2013 and papers...

2. The artificial terrain of the park is unceded Pokagon Band of Potawatomi land that was forcibly appropriated by the United States government. The settler-colonial occupation of the area that resulted in the 1833 Treaty of Chicago saw the Potawatomi only ever “agree” (having little choice in reality) to give up claim to the dry land area (i.e. west of Michigan Avenue), not the waters of Lake Michigan which were later filled in for the park. In 1917 the Supreme Court nonetheless found in favour of continued ownership of the US government despite the reclaimed area never being legally ceded by the Potawatomi. See the Settler Colonial City Project (https://settlercolonialcityproject.org/Unceded-Land).
in the same issue). Vast quantities of anthropogenically produced waste materials are now part of the Earth’s strata and play an ongoing and significant role in the activities which take place upon it. Of relevance here is the concept of the “archaeosphere” introduced by Edgeworth (2014): a globe-spanning deposit with a lower boundary located on (or cutting partly through) pre-existing “natural” geological strata and subject to continuous modification. In a broad sense, then, the entirety of human interaction with both pre-human geology and earlier layers of human activity could be said to give rise to the formation and transformation of a single waste landscape – a continual and ever-changing substratum of dumped materials and below-ground features and structures that we, together with non-human geological and biological forces, continue to adapt and remake. Each of the examples of this issue examines a local manifestation of this archaeosphere and explores how waste is produced, disposed of, reused and reimagined to shape and reshape landscapes.

Definitions

Full discussion of the many definitions of landscape fall outside the scope of this short introduction but, broadly speaking, the contributors take the term to mean both “a real spatial-physical entity” and its conceptualisation, abstraction and representations (Kolen and Renes 2015, 28). In this case, waste is physically present in and on these landscapes but is also implicit in how they have been valued or portrayed and represented. This raises the question of just how one is to define waste itself.

Josh Reno argues that, given its inherent subjectivity (archaeologists’ fascination with refuse being an excellent example), what is defined as waste seems to exist as a continuum of understandings that resist simplistic dichotomies of positive or negative, trash or treasure (Reno 2014). Calling a substance, object or landscape waste (or labelling something “a waste of”, or “wasted”) is therefore an inherently temporal judgement: “the value of things is determined by the times of use and waste that we ascribe to them”, and thus, how we conceptualise such value being realised – or not – in future (Viney 2015, 4).

At a landscape scale, this shifting temporal valuation may be even more pronounced. For example, Venovcevs has recently described how the landscape surrounding a Norwegian iron ore mine has shifted “ambiguously” from being the wasted by-product of a once-productive industry, to heritage site, then briefly back to (potential) economic value and then “wasted” again, in the space of just a few years during periods that the mine was, respectively, open, mothballed, reopened and then closed again (Venovcevs 2022, 46).

The Contributions

Reflecting their diversity of conceptual and temporal valuations and uses, each author in this forum addresses several core concerns connected to waste landscapes. How did each waste landscape come to be? What do these landscapes afford those who use, or otherwise interact with, them (human and non-human)? How far do such sites remain as waste – do they take on other kinds of valuations and resonances (e.g. as heritage)?
Setting the scene for rest of the issue, **Edgeworth** examines mega-scale waste landscapes through discussion of several former clay pits now filled with domestic refuse. Here he grapples with how one can carry out archaeology on such large sites and shows that conventions of archaeological stratigraphy apply even at these enormous scales. He demonstrates the (literally) broad scale of what is possible with waste landscape research and highlights the significant implications the field offers for studies of the Anthropocene.

Moving to slightly smaller scales, **Gardner** discusses rubble generated by the aerial bombing (and subsequent demolition) of thousands of homes and factories in London during World War II. He shows how this was reimagined and repurposed as fill for new leisure spaces on previously marshy ground in the east of the city. Despite being buried, this rubble is still very much capable of interrupting the present – at some junctures supporting novel terrains of sport, creativity and heritage, while at others, prompting a contested remembering and forgetting of the conflict itself.

Following this, **Spiwak**’s paper uses the evocatively named “bastard” waste rock of the slate industry of northwest Wales as an analogy for how industrial waste landscapes are conceptualised as heritage. Once again, we see how a seemingly inert and quiet waste landscape remains active and contested, and how waste materials challenge notions of what kinds of valuation are “Outstanding” enough to be allowed inside the territorial and discursive boundaries of a World Heritage Site.

Expanding the temporal and geographical scope of this issue, **Graham and colleagues** then discuss “dark earth”, anthrosols at Ambergris Caye, Belize. Here, new fertile soils were created through practices of disposal over centuries of occupation, yet, the authors note, such places are never called “wastelands” or understood as waste landscapes. They suggest that, in an era of threats to soil security and its essential role in food production, we must recognise waste as the soil of the future rather than something to be set apart from human existence.

Taking a closer look at how categories of waste objects shape landscape, **Praet and colleagues** examine shorelines on the Galapagos and Hawaii archipelagos that are characterised by a seemingly infinite stream of seaborne plastic waste, as landscapes epitomising our “Plastic Age”. They show how archaeological approaches can document not only where such waste comes from, but also, by engaging with local communities, how waste in landscapes can prompt reflection on our own behaviour and the challenges waste presents to wider society.

Building on the special issue’s focus on how waste landscapes are imagined and reimagined, **Benjamin** meditates on the implications of the language and practice of “making ground” itself. Here he examines post-industrial landscapes in Rosendale, New York State, and how waste materials become a work of art in and of the landscape.

Finally, **McClanahan-Simmons** concludes the forum with two waste landscapes produced by failed development projects in Edinburgh and in Detroit, Michigan. Here waste not only physically occupies terrain but also conceptually underpins how such places are valued and re-valued by humans and non-humans alike. In particular, she demonstrates the pliable temporal and discursive generativity of waste matter and waste landscapes as places of “permanent reimagining”.

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Introduction

Summary

It is hoped that this issue collectively highlights the value of studying waste-modified terrain as a distinct subject of contemporary landscape archaeology. If such landscapes are framed as particularised, local manifestations of the Archaeosphere, then by implication that places them in the context of the broader debate on the nature of the Anthropocene. In this sense, rather than seeking a single marker for the proposed geological epoch with a singular “Golden Spike” (such as the radioactive isotopes from the first nuclear detonations), the ongoing reconfiguration of waste landscapes instead supports the compelling argument for seeing the Anthropocene as an open-ended, ongoing event, rather than a fixed geological chronostratigraphic time unit (Gibbard et al. 2022).

Before ending we wish to suggest two caveats. Firstly, there is obviously a risk that the research presented here contains the potential for aestheticisation or de-politicisation of the origins and uses of waste. Clearly we must be careful not to ignore the real negative ecological and social effects that can arise from landscapes shaped by waste, or deny that waste materials and waste landscapes are often a direct result of human greed and gross brutality, especially in the wake of ongoing wars in Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, Tigray and elsewhere. Thus, in all waste landscape research, drawing on important work from the field of discard studies (e.g. Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022), we must be mindful of the uneven power relations inherent in waste’s creation and its disposal or use in human-altered landscapes.

Secondly – and on the subject of power relations – while we as editors and our authors draw upon a range of global examples here, it cannot be denied that we are predominantly drawing from western European and North American disciplinary traditions. While the range of contributors is mainly the result of those who responded to the original conference call and session, and reflects the regions in which we work or are based, clearly this special forum is not globally representative and is thus by no means a comprehensive overview of archaeological waste landscape research. As with our opening example of the unceded Pokagon Potawatomi land that is now Grant Park, it must also be recognised that acts of wasting and making with waste also often intersect with colonialism, racism, violent land appropriations and environmental degradation (e.g. Hird 2017; Çilingiroğlu and Albayrak 2022, 12; Lawrence et al. 2023; Praet et al. this issue).

Despite these limitations, we nonetheless hope that the issue opens up conversations and opportunities for a broader range of work and for establishing connections across different regions and specialisms, including in contexts where landscape modifications with waste are linked to episodes of historical and contemporary injustice. We hope that future waste landscape research will lead to further, careful, evidence-based consideration of not only how these places came into being, but also the implications and effects of their continued existence for those who live with them now and will do so in the future.

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3. This said while recognising the unequal opportunities around costs, visas and immigration, racism, sexism and privileged networks of professional patronage that limit participation in such international conferences.
References


Introduction


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