Counter-plots
Dan Handel & Justin Fowler

From British Columbia down to the American Pacific Northwest, from the Deep South to the Brazilian coast, the American continent is saturated with forest environments. Looking at forests, however, is quite different from looking at forestry. This distinction applies on both visual and structural levels: with the former, a sensitive gaze is required to distinguish between closed and fragmented forests, between state-owned and privately managed environments, and between biotic heritage complexes and monocultural plantations. In the case of the latter, of prime importance are political climates, material differences between hard timber and soft pulp, and accessibility to a cheap labour force.

Involving an array of spatial configurations, forestry is a striking manifestation of the rift between developing and post-industrial countries, replete with socio-economic inequality across a range of scales. Canada's $74-billion forest product industry, the United States' 450 million acres of private forestlands, and Brazil's 6.5 million forestry jobs, have created substantial imprints on development patterns in these countries.[1] And while forestry constitutes a massive spatial enterprise, it remains largely unnoticed by design scholars and professionals alike. This blind spot is due in part to the often covert operations of capital interests in industrial frontiers, but is most significantly due to the "natural" appearance of the forest industry, suggesting an ambivalent entanglement of nature and resource.

Overcoming this disciplinary distance would involve acknowledging forests as artificial environments, planned and managed with the same degree of spatial design attention given, say, to cities. This acknowledgment entails a conscious abandonment of the mystification of nature that typically envelops the subject. Attempts by architects at literal expression through the design of structures that resemble forests, or the design of actual forests for pure aesthetic appreciation do nothing to clarify this situation. In addition, recognizing that most of the forest areas harvested throughout the continent are not old growth, but rather recently afforested landscapes foregrounds an ecological history tightly linked with resource extraction. Once the issue of representational fidelity to nature is cleared out of the way, we have to tackle one more preconception: the assumed triumph of postindustrial society and its underlying networked organization, which have become a hegemonic metaphor of contemporary design discourse and an alibi for a broad assault on discrete architectural and urban form.[2] In contrast, American forests, strictly associated with the rationale of form, are massively scaled, designed environments with distinct material imprints. As such, they make a case for an urban physicality irreducible to a single economy, and can, almost paradoxically, acquire once again the status of a prototype for contemporary cities.[3]

Notes

1. Sources: Canada Wood Council (1999), American Forest & Paper Association—www.afandpa.org (accessed 2011), ABIMCI-Brazilian Association for Mechanically Processed Timber (2003) & SECEX-Brazilian Bureau of Foreign Trade (2005)
2. Instances of this line of argument, associating the autopoiesis of networks with the erosion of agency through designed form, are many and include Charles Waldheim's take on the American city, where it is understood as the provisional material expression of formal relations between property ownership, speculative development and mobile capital in *Stalking Detroit* (2001) or James Corner's call for the design of landscapes as an ecological process in "Ecology and Landscape as Agents of Creativity," included in Thompson and Steiner, *Ecological Design and Planning* (1997). Earlier examples can be traced in Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co's texts in *The American City* (1979). The theoretical infrastructure for the network argument was provided by Manuel Castells' "The Informational City" (1989).
3. As was the case with Marc-Antoine Laugier's 1753 proposition to design the "town as forest."

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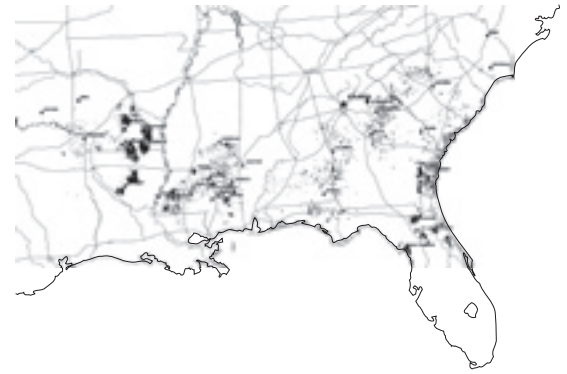
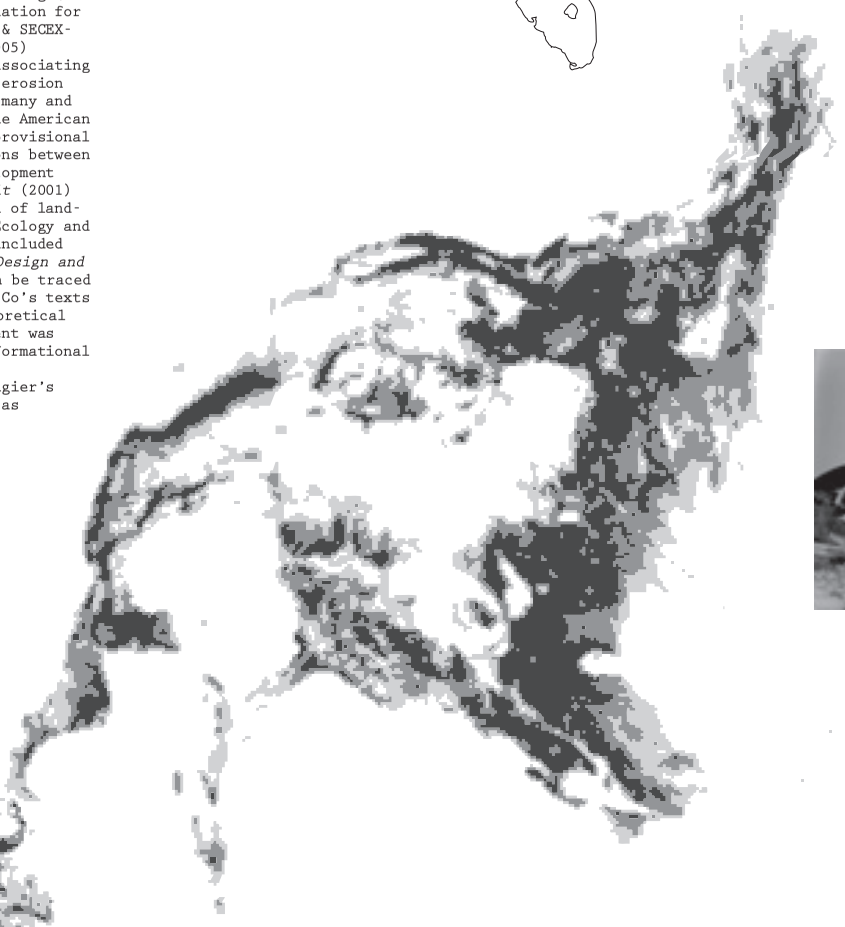
Justin Fowler received his M.Arch from the Harvard GSD. He is an assistant editor of *Invention/Transformation: Strategies for the Qattara/Jimi Oases in Al Ain* (Harvard GSD, 2010) and his writing has appeared in *Volume*, *Pidgin*, *Speciale Z Journal*, *PIN-UP*, *Topos*, and *Conditions* magazine. He currently manages research and editorial projects at the Columbia Lab for Architectural Broadcasting (C-LAB).



Since the 1970s and the rise of environmentalism, most forestry operations have moved from the Pacific Northwest to the South

In the U.S., railroad land grants provided the biggest property base for timber companies' holdings

The self-drowning, self-loading barge developed by British Columbia Forest Products

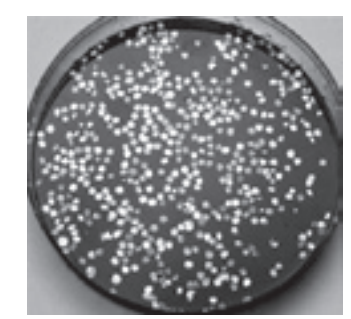


The new pulp and paper projects in Brazil will represent a demand increase for timber of approximately 13 million m³/year. greenwood-management.com

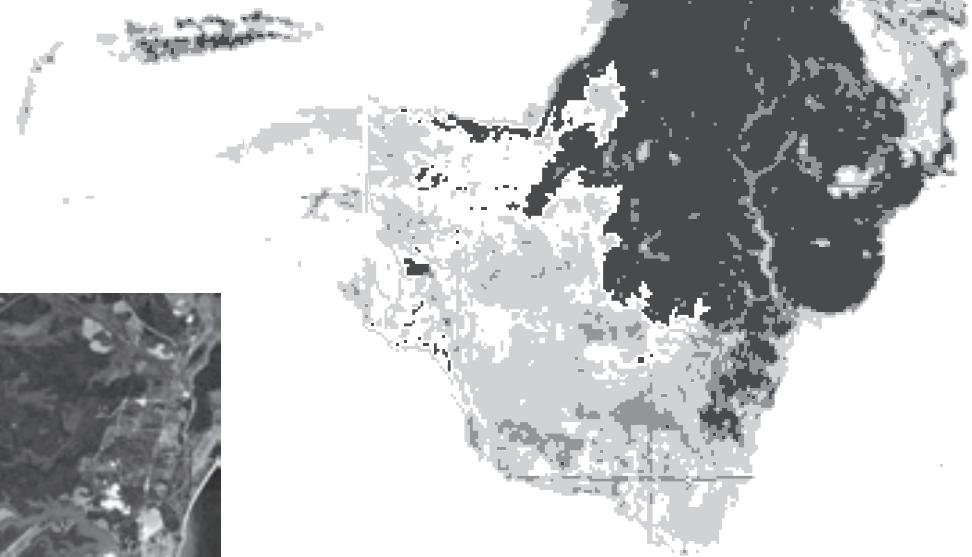
closed forest

fragmented forest

low density forest



Canada promotes an innovation-based industry, venturing into new materials such as Nano-crystalline Cellulose (NCC), which can act as recyclable replacement for plastic



Brazil

Brazil has 12% of the world's forests

Direct and indirect jobs: 6,500,000

Goods and services: $20 billion

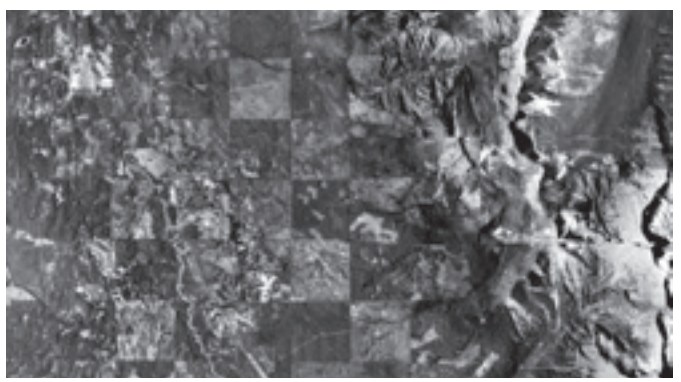
Private forests: 56%

Forest land/ Total land area

Plantation area in Brazil is increasing in average 3% per year. Eucalyptus trees are genetically engineered to grow 10 times faster.

United States

Forest companies are the largest private landowners in the United States, with more than 10% of total land area



Direct and indirect jobs: 1,600,000

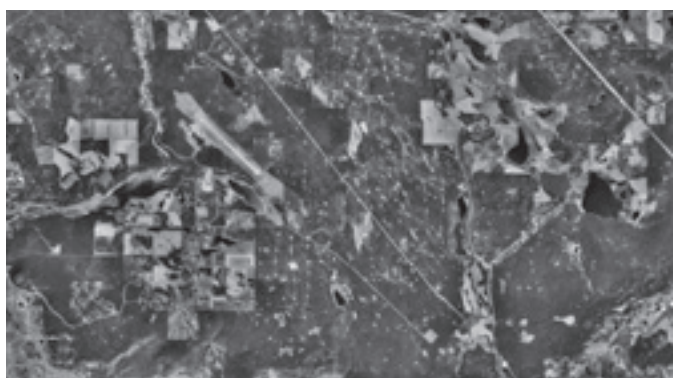
Goods and services: $240 billion

Private forests: 57%

Forest land/ Total land area

Canada

By law, all forests harvested on Canada's public land must be successfully regenerated In the ongoing softwood lumber dispute, the U.S. alleges that Canada unfairly subsidizes its forestry industry



Direct and indirect jobs: 850,000

Goods and services: $74 billion

Private forests: 7.9%

Forest land/ Total land area