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Slow Valley / A modest proposition to cultivate an Agrarian Landscape

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Abstract

Located between a vast agricultural plain and the sea is a 10-kilometer fragment of land. This plot both interrupts the agriculture landscape with an abrupt line of hills and frames a valley of wetland estuary. The location is ecologically sensitive, diverse and beautiful. The site is the epitome of Albania today, displaying natural beauty alongside abandoned infrastructure of the former communist agriculture complex. Among the ruins is a local populous that subsists on the natural resources through both industrialized and preindustrial farming practices.

This essay identifies the dilemma that faces this small fragment of land. It will question and interrogate the social, political and agricultural issues. It will seek to ask the questions for a landscape that finds itself undergoing economic pressure in rapidly developing Albania. Within the outlined constraints of context, time and place; a design proposition will be described that attempts to tend to, not fix, a small fragment of land containing a slow valley. (Fig. 1)

Slow will be argued as an economic asset. This stands in contrast to many capitalist models but seeks to recognize the post-industrial context this fragment of land is situated. The valley is named in this study as slow valley due to both its relative speed in contrast to the city center and in the time needed to cultivate an agrarian life. It is intentional that the valley takes its name from the successful slow food moment in Albania. The modest design proposition presented is the physical manifestation that aligns with the slow food movement's values (Gowing, 2017).

Introduction

The landscape is often referred to as "natural" or "manmade" - terms that are both suspicious at best. Indeed, at one time the earth was undisturbed in a virgin state, free from altercation and human corruption. This ideal is what many scholars refer to as esthetic beauty itself (Pye, 1978: 96-116). The assertion is that beauty is our desire to return to the unaltered state of our world. Design compositions that are described as "beautiful" are generally aligned with the natural order of the environment. This summation is oversimplified, but the logic reveals a partial truth. Calculus, physics, and the language arts all use

the order and logic of the natural world to seek fundamental truths. Proportion, color theory and other first principles of design also acknowledge that much of what we consider as beautiful are design compositions that bring order and understanding of our world. Tadao Ando speaks of beauty as "the elements of nature - water, wind, light, and sky - bring architecture derived from ideological thought down to the ground level of reality and awaken man-made life within it" (Nesbitt, 2008: 460). These principles spring from our desire to seek what makes us human. Esthetics without order or understanding of these principles is superficial. When designers afford the

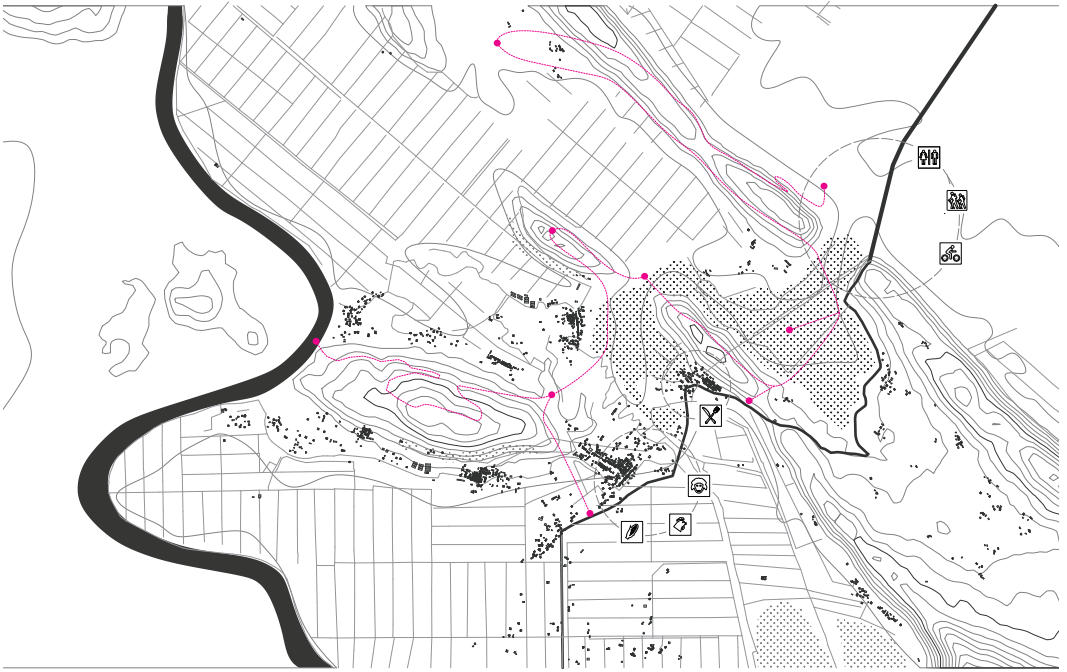


Fig1 / Slow Valley
source / the author

world a landscape that aligns with our true human nature we find authenticity.

Reflecting on our natural world is only afforded by cartesian thought and an industrialized world where we are free from the toils of labor. Prior to industrialization more people suffered the toils of labor. Their decisions were shaped by survival, not intellectual meditations on the landscape. Alternatively, the land was crafted through a slow process of evolution that addressed long-term needs and created balance through polyculture farming. Farmers learned that rotating their crops and growing a variety of species maintained soil fertility. They learned that maintaining forested areas adjacent to cultivated land provided water filtration, erosion control, and blocked damaging prevailing winds. They understood the importance of healthy grasslands and where and when to move ruminant herds.

They found that domestic birds could follow behind ruminant herds to feed and fertilize the ground to maintain turf. When done correctly, farmers could maintain symbiosis and efficiently produce high yields. This system, referred to as polyculture farming, aligns with what nature requires by acknowledging where and how plants grew in the wild and how domesticated animals like sheep and chickens can be made to live like their wild ancestors (Pollan, 2016: 32-57). The successful polyculture farm was, and sometimes still is - beautiful. (Fig.2) The farmer can achieve beauty but more importantly by way of an intimate

connection to the land. When achieved, farming is no longer laborious toil but useful work (Morris, 1184: 98-120).

The Yeoman, the Hammer, and the Sickle

The agricultural landscape and peasantry is held in high regard by most cultures. No doubt it is due to our human need for food and its importance to our security and survival. In a preindustrial state both Albania and Western Europe had proud and productive traditions of agriculture. It is understandable how emerging power systems in both America and in Albania, under the influence of communism and capitalism, used the romance of agriculture to centralize control of the food security of the Western world (Giedion, 1948: 130).

The Yeoman farmer was the pride of England and served as the idealistic farmer citizen for Thomas Jefferson when describing his vision for the development of the United States. Jefferson and others believed that owning and tilling one's land was a path to the most virtuous life calling the yeoman the "chosen people of God". They further believed that the honesty of agriculture would secure a non-corrupt system of government stating: "corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example" (Harrison, 1945: 104-106). The honesty of staking claim to land and harvesting the fruits from the soil was regarded as pleasing to God. This became the ideological basis for the United States' vast continental grid that spans from the Ohio River west to the Pacific Ocean. The land was subdivided



Fig2 / Polyface Farms, Virginia, USA
source / Photo by Hannah Winstead

into a grid that delineated town and countryside to ensure land ownership and cultivation for Revolutionary War veterans and the influx of immigrants arriving at the Atlantic ports (Reps, 1997: 294). This agrarian idealism still resonates in most of the US today and manifest through sprawling land developments that still provide grass lawns or "land to till" even for those far removed from agriculture.

The hammer and the sickle were first paired together during the Russian Revolution and later adopted by Albania to symbolize the Unity of Industry (hammer) and peasantry (sickle). The pairing of these two tools marked the summation of, and a reaction against, the forces on all farmers and workers around the world. Beginning in England in the 18th Century the industrial revolution upended most of the farmer's ability to farm independently and symbiotically (Allitt, 2017: 03). Both Joseph Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union and Henry Ford, the American industrialist understood the power of industrialization. The true power was not in the products but in the consolidation of personal knowledge (Crawford, 2009: 37-53). Ford was able to capitalize on the craft knowledge of carriage makers by ingeniously distributing the tasks along an assembly line. This allowed Ford to hire unskilled labor to assemble his cars at a lower price. The personal knowledge of the carriage maker was no longer valuable or marketable. Stalin did much the same with the mechanization of industry and agriculture personified by the hammer and sickle. This of course was viewed as a populist ideal giving the industry and

agriculture back to the people. To do so however, in an industrialized world, Stalin consolidated the personal knowledge of those people under a political and governmental entity. Many would argue rightfully that both Stalin and Ford provided paying jobs to many that otherwise would have never had one. That they allowed people that would otherwise toil in labor to survive by working a standard work day. A pluralist view does beg the question what is personal knowledge worth to the post-industrial landscape? What is the craft of carriage making worth and what is the epistemological value of agriculture? Considering the wealth of the Ford family today and of Russian oligarchs it is safe to state the price is quite high. There is evidence that Ford understood this and was motivated by this new-found truth. He famously said: "If money is your hope for independence you will never have it. The only real security that a man will have in this world is a reserve of knowledge, experience, and ability." The word "reserve" is curious, in that it implies that it is beyond any one person's compacity to have more, so you must acquire it from others. This quote is often used as inspirational, to motivate young people to seek education and self-betterment. Carefully read, it does not seem so generous, it appears to inform us of what he did to the craftsman of America. This observation is one that should be understood by leaders, policy makers and designers. As we move into a post-industrial and post-capitalist era what will be the importance of personal knowledge? Who and what groups of individuals and policy makers will hold

the epistemic knowledge of agriculture – the farmer, the corporation or the government?

The efficiency of mechanization spurred governments to encourage the consolidation of farms in an effort to increase production. Consolidation was a political act that had dire consequences on the epistemology of agriculture itself. No longer was a farmer maintaining a balance of symbiosis, but farming a single crop to maximize yields (Pollan, 2016: 1-15). This further drove the prices of agriculture commodities lower thus increasing the need for each farmer to increase yield and volume. The consolidation of farms moved farmers from being peasant citizens to obedient agriculture factory workers. This economic model is based on production and consumption and does not value symbiosis; the result is excess waste and loss of personal knowledge. The removal of purpose of the peasant citizen removed their control of the landscape and realigned it to a government entity producing the harsh environmental, infrastructural and economic realities faced by rural Albania today.

Slow Valley

The consolidation of farming that occurred in Albania is palatable as you drive from Shkodra to the coast along Rruga Shkodër - Velipojë. As you leave the dense urban environment of Shkodra and cross the confluence of the Drin and Bojana River the landscape opens up to a vast horizontal plain of agriculture. When viewed from above the land is subdivided in large plots by mechanized irrigation ditches where water is pumped from low reservoirs to the west and into the farm lands. The order provided by the former government does not seem to rule this land today. Greenhouses scaled to service large areas of land stand broken, altered or abandoned. Herds of sheep and their shepherds cross planted fields without consideration. Although purely observational, the land does not adhere to polyculture farming, nor does it operate as an efficient mechanized farming operation. An observer could easily assume that the agriculture is one that has lost its way. That it once was independent and at harmony with nature and free of political obstruction. With the decline of the former government's control over agriculture it is imperative that the Albanian farmers be supported in realigning their process with the natural order of the land. Align with nature, treat the land as it requires - or perish. Now the crumbling communist

agricultural infrastructure is mixed with a peasantry trying to reestablish itself. Unfortunately, as a farmer, no matter your country, you can be abandoned by government and capitalism.

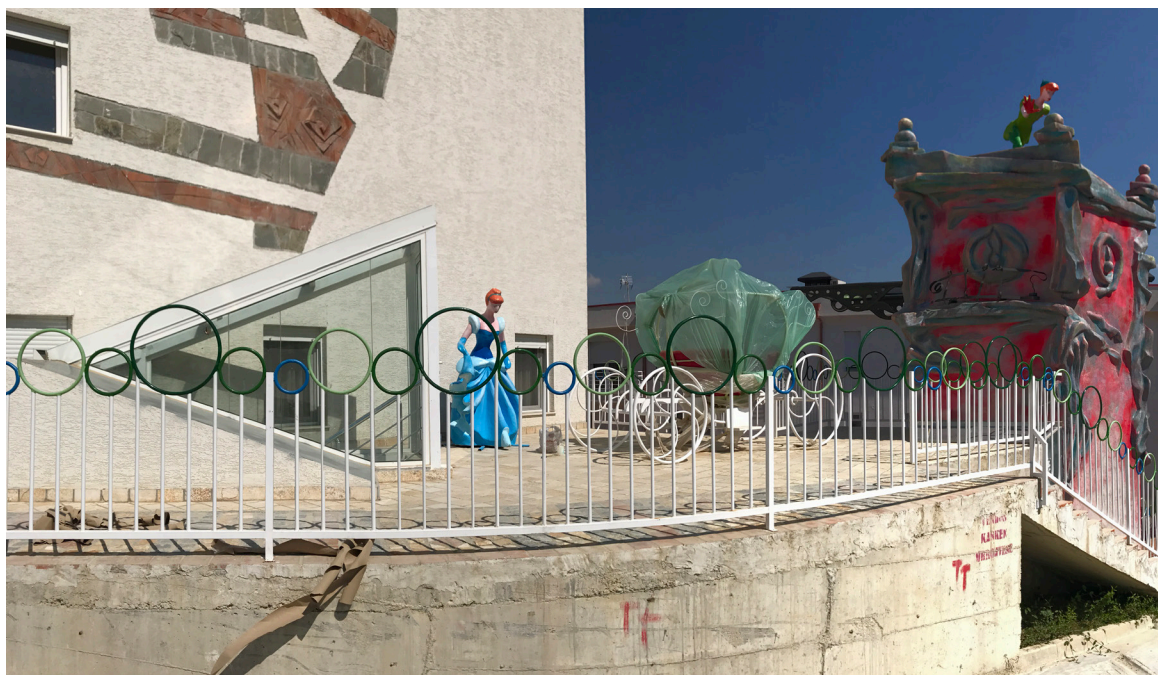
It is speed that shaped the Western world. Efficiency and mechanization was sought by all governments and corporations and still persists as the primary factor of profitability and measure of a nation's wealth. However, speed is linear, not circular and counter to the ideas of agricultural symbiosis (Giedion, 1948: 130-167). You cannot speed up a polyculture farm, it will mature when nature allows. When speed and mechanization fail both government and company will move on to new ventures leaving people and landscape behind. In this small fragment of land in Albania this is the case. Gone is hammer and sickle and the peasantry remain in what seems like slow motion to their urban neighbors to the east.

Anti-Colonialism and Restraint as Design

As architects and designers, we have been trained to "fix" problems or dilemmas we are given in the built environment. Our education and our profession encourage this with all good intentions.

We rarely question if what we are doing is appropriate if the overall intentions are to improve a communities' conditions. This leads to a neo-colonialist approach to design where the designer knows better and the peasantry will benefit from our intellect. The current occupants of Slow Valley do not appear to have benefited from top-down solutions nor have they been encouraged to prosper independently. Slow Valley is "slow", for the motorist traveling to the sea and for the peasantry, why as architects do we feel we should, or can, change this variable? Slow is good for plants, animals, and for this valley: any design proposition that does not accept this will fail as evidenced by the crumbling infrastructure. Slow Valley can remain slow but the pace of development in Albania is fast and likely to push over anything in its way (Aliaj, Shutina, and Dharmo, 2010) (Fig.3). Therefore, equally important is that any design proposition for Slow Valley recognize the speed and energy pushing in on it from the outside. To resist and remain sustainable for the peasantry it must find value and relevance to politicians and visitors alike.

The description and observations may seem dire but it does position Albania and this Slow Valley in a unique position in Europe and the Western world. In Western culture today, most food is



produced through industrialized farming with polyculture farming only existing as a novelty. The produce is sold as a better product with all the trappings of idealized past. The polyculture farms of the United States have all but been eliminated by large industrialized farms with livestock almost exclusively reared in mass feeding operations (MFOs) (Pollan, 2016: 226-239). Interrupting and competing with this mega-industrialized agribusiness is very difficult if not impossible. But Albania has a choice in the direction of the agriculture in the country and how the land is cultivated and cared for. Signs of the Albanian contextual disjunction with other Western countries can be seen on a plate of food in Albania. In season, it is unlikely that the tomato in your salad was flown thousands of miles on a plane so that you would have it “fresh”. It is less likely that the eggs you eat are produced on the other side of the continent in mass hen operations. This is however the reality of most of the developed Western world. Eating local is a novelty not a standard reality for most of the Western world, however in Albania it still persists in many places. Ironically, the opportunity to maintain a symbiotic agricultural system is real in Albania and is partially happening today due to the failures of past government policy.

Polyculture Proposition

The conditions warrant an agricultural proposition of balance between polyculture farming and consolidated farming. This balance will provide both the volume necessary for Albania's farmers to be regionally competitive by

maintaining a volume to yield ratio that is sustainable and provide possible export surplus available. The profits of this industrialized product should be used to subsidize polyculture farms dispersed in the same landscape. This will not only sustain the fertility of the land but also preserve the epistemological knowledge of farming so that it remains in the domain of the people - not the government or the corporation. This balance can and should be achieved through land division that not only maintains the percentage balance but ensures proximity and intermixing of polyculture and industrialized farms. The industrialized and polyculture farming balance suggested can be debated in their proportions but the potential outcomes are clear: local produce and purpose for the peasantry. A designer's contribution is one that embraces the slow in Slow Valley and encourages visitors to shift their speed to accommodate that of the setting. The design proposal for Slow Valley is not heavy-handed infrastructure but a simple and slow trail. The trail meanders through the valley and the features along the way serve to tease out the beauty and assets of this unique place. The proposal is described through a series of vignettes consisting of trail and landscape condition each facilitating a strength of the land's time and place by addressing the needs of the peasantry and the visitor equally.

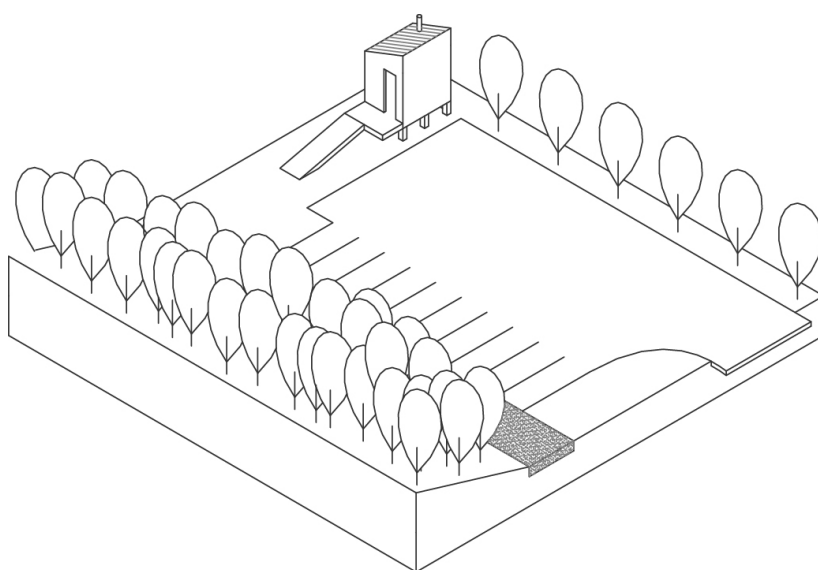
The Trail

A semi-pervious path to accommodate both the walking and cycling visitors alongside local Shepards and their ruminant herds.



*Fig3 / Pop culture encroaching on polyculture
source / the author*

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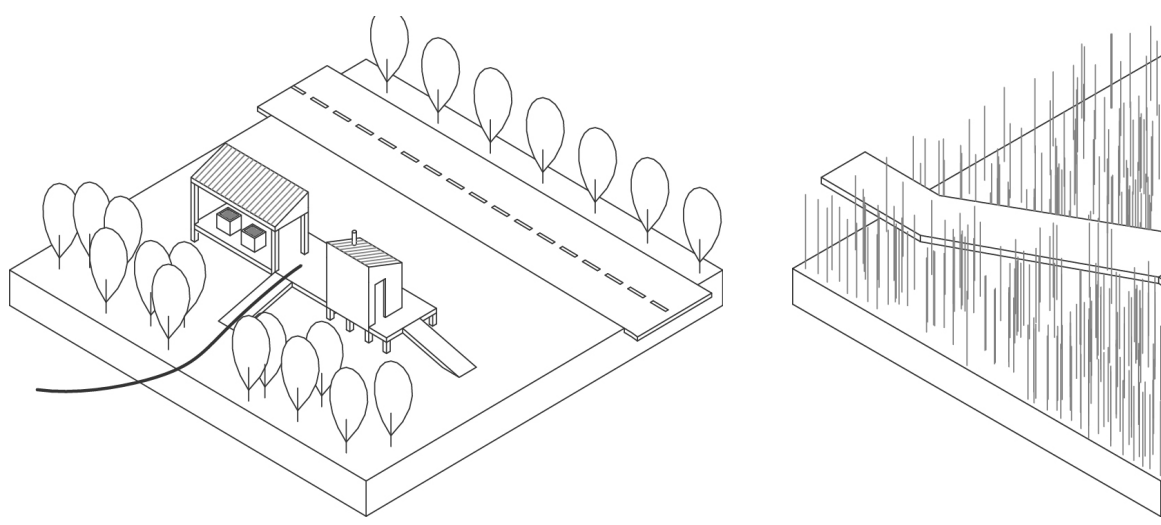
*Fig4 / Slow down parking
source / the author*

Slow down Parking. Situated between farm land and the opening of the hills is a simple parking lot with restroom facility that serves as the trail head. Visitors will be given the opportunity to park and walk or park and cycle through the valley. This is the point of departure and return for many visitors. (Fig.4)

Commerce. The trail passes strategically near the dwellings of the farmers and the road. In these locations, a small point-of-sale building will be constructed for farmers' use. These buildings occurring

throughout Slow Valley will be an intentional point of overlap between the peasantry and the visitors. Polyculture farms can sell their produce to the visitors. (Fig.5)

Wetlands Hike. The path takes advantage of the ecologically diverse wetlands through a raised platform. As the trail approaches the center of the wetlands an observation tower will be erected to view birds and other wildlife that have been returning to the estuary in recent years. (Fig.6)



Distributed Forest. The trail will pass through the farm land. This will be interrupted by distributed forests between the cultivated land. The forest area will provide erosion control, water filtration and wind protection while also provide a scenic path for visitors. (Fig.7)

Livestock Refuge. Due to the frequent flooding experienced in the Shkodra region the trail will lead to the top of the rocky hills surrounding the valley. This will provide an obstructed path for livestock refuge in times of flooding. Additionally, these paths will provide scenic overlooks for visitors. (Fig.8)

River Dock. The trail will terminate at a river dock. This terminus serves as access to the river that is now inaccessible to most visitors. (Fig.9)

Conclusion

A simple trail will not fix this valley. No government policy or act of design can create an idealized agrarian utopia. Acknowledgment of this will allow architects, planners and policy makers to view their compacity for restraint as an asset. Slow Valley does not need to be “fixed” it only needs to be tended by design. This can be accomplished by small interventions as illustrated here by the trail. It can be achieved by governments that enact policies that seek to preserve the peasantry and the epistemological ownership they have earned. No monumental proposals will succeed, but by using restraint as an act of design Slow Valley will cultivate the land and accommodate needs of both the visitors and the peasantry.

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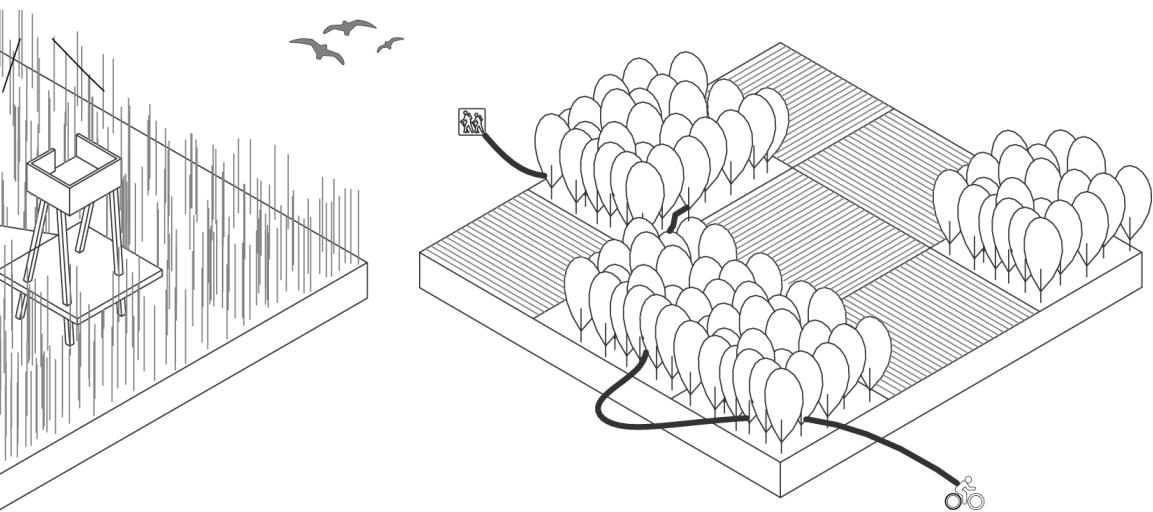


Fig5 / Commerce
Fig6 / Wetlands hike
Fig7 / Distributed forest
source / the author

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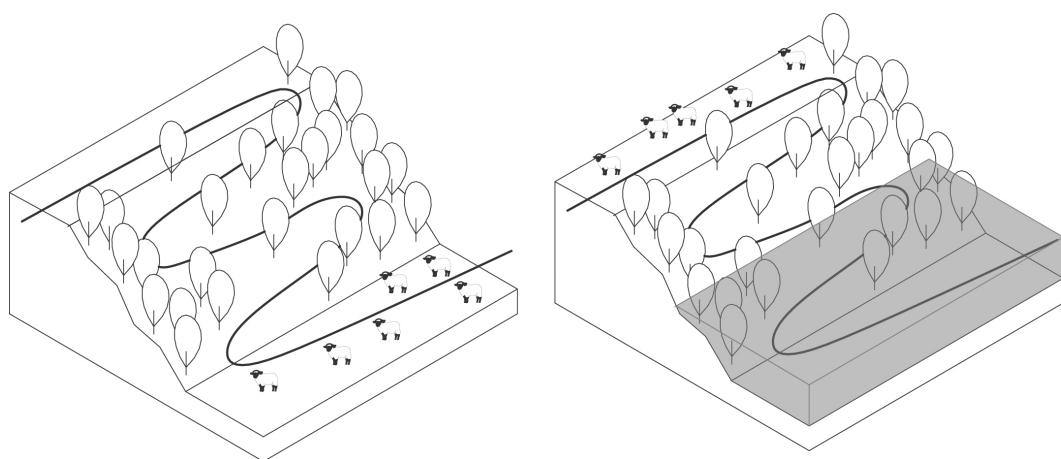


Fig8 / Livestock refuge
source / the author

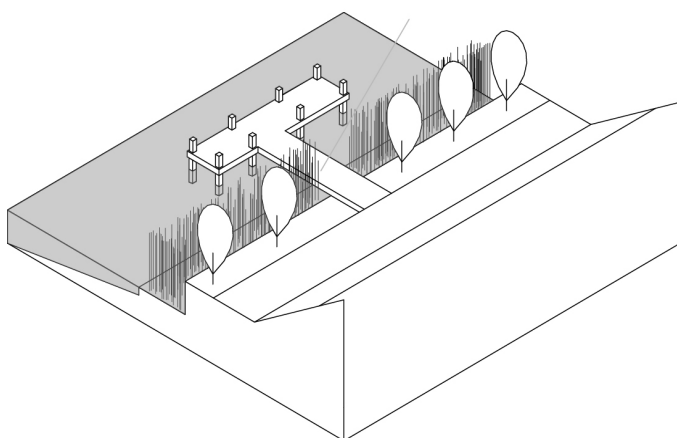


Fig9 / River dock
source / the author