

Interview with Hadley Arnold

Intro

Hadley and Peter Arnold are founding co-directors of the Arid Land Institute (ALI) at Woodbury University in Burbank, California. Hadley and Peter were Bogliasco Fellows in the spring of 2000, and, since then, their research on contemporary and historic water infrastructures of the west has continued to attract widespread attention. They have taught multiple history and theory seminars on landscape, infrastructure and urbanism in arid lands, and their design work has been recognized by Los Angeles's MAK Center for Art and Architecture; the LA Architecture + Design Museum, and the AIA/LA.

The Arid Land Institute is a self-sustaining education, research and outreach center of Woodbury University dedicated to issues of aridity, climate change and the design of the built environment. Its purpose is to train designers and leaders who will be resourceful and inventive in addressing water scarcity in the west. The ALI brings people and ideas together across multiple disciplines to shape answers and envision a future in which landscapes and communities are resilient—environmentally, culturally and economically—in the face of regional aridity.

Interview Questions

Hadley, you were a Bogliasco Fellow in Architecture in the spring of 2000, and Peter was a Fellow in Visual Arts. At the Study Center, you worked together on the project, *The Architecture of Water in the West: A Photographic Survey*. Could you explain how this project came about?

Hadley: The project began through Peter's eyes. As a westerner (he's from Colorado), a designer, and a photographer, he was always drawn to exploring the western landscape, how it had been altered by man at a vast scale and at the same time how that vast altering has remained largely invisible to most westerners. By focusing on the water infrastructures of the west and how they make city-making possible, historically and today, he was undertaking design inquiry at a vast scale and the research was, by necessity, physical, visual, and geographically vast.

For me, the project came about as a companion, literally, to Peter's photographic explorations. If I were going to spend time with my husband when he spent extended periods of time photographing remote landscapes involving long car rides and many hours behind a large-format camera, I wanted to see and learn from his inquiry. As a transplant from the humid east, I felt I needed to understand a landscape and its workings that were, truthfully, totally alien to me. Peter literally opened my eyes to the distinctive character of the arid American west as an engineered landscape.

Even though we both were trained as architects in Los Angeles—a fabrication made entirely possible by engineering half a continent to support it—no one had ever made the connection to us during our education as designers: that all architectures and urbanisms of the west were dependent on this monumental, and yet fragile and overtaxed, network of engineering systems. So while Peter photographed, I walked and read and tried to understand what we were seeing, how it

was produced, what it had spawned, and what it might require in terms of design response and a new kind of design education.

Your project focused on the dry, dusty landscape of the American west. Your Bogliasco Fellowship brought you around the world to work on it in the lush climate of Italy's west coast. How did the juxtaposition of these two landscapes affect you, and do you think it influenced your work in any way?

Hadley: It affected us profoundly, and continues to. Los Angeles is typically described as a Mediterranean climate. Technically, this is true in the limited sense of a temperate, semi-arid climate enjoyed between the coastal mountain ranges and the ocean. In that sense, it shares an aesthetic resemblance to the coastal Mediterranean: what grows in Bogliasco's gardens also thrives in the gardens of coastal Southern California. The resemblance, however, is what fascinates us, because the surface is misleading. Southern California—as American environmentalist Marc Reisner memorably taught us—is a semi-arid region with a desert heart. Its plumbing, its life-support lines, drawn from the snow melt of the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada, are what make it possible; pulling water across a 500,000 square mile tray is what makes the sustained illusion of 'Mediterranean' urbanity possible in Southern California. Peeling back that false description of Southern California, and relocating the region within the larger accuracy of its dependency on half a continent's water resources recalibrates what it means to design appropriately there.

Can you explain how and why the Arid Land Institute was founded at Woodbury University?

Hadley: During our Bogliasco Fellowships in 2000, Peter digitally processed his negatives and prepared them for large-scale printing, and I read and wrote short texts to accompany the photographs. On return to the US, we were invited to mount an exhibition at a small private university in Burbank---Woodbury. That exhibition resulted in an invitation to teach seminars and design studios focusing on dry lands design. In 2008, we proposed that those courses form the basis of a multidisciplinary education, research, and outreach institute at Woodbury. ALI received major funding from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development in 2009.

You have said that, in addition to the science, policy and quantitative dimensions of your work, there is a rich vein of history that runs through it, including a deep root in the Mediterranean. Could you explain more about this?

Hadley: We have always looked at the historical and archeological record of settlement in the West as a fantastic textbook on how societies have molded themselves to an arid landscape, and molded the landscape to themselves. With what techniques and strategies? For what duration? And with what consequences? Every summer, we run a field station—a traveling classroom—that introduces

students of drylands design to the great building experiments of the pre-Columbian southwest—Hohokam engineering beneath modern-day Phoenix, and Chaco as a regional ceremonial center, for example. We also look closely at the irrigation strategies and settlement patterns—*acequia* culture—imported from the Arab Middle East via the Moors to the Iberian Peninsula and then brought to the New World, a form of water-democracy and water-technology still at use in traditional farming communities in the west today. Recently, we have begun to look farther afield, with seminars and a public lecture series examining technologies that made architecture and urbanism possible in arid and semi-arid environments the world over. Katherine Rinne, for example, a historian of the water infrastructures of Rome, developed an amazing undergraduate seminar that looked not only at Rome but also Istanbul, Athens, Carthage, Syracuse and Sienna; she looked at Islamic and Medieval monastic gardens. Other lecturers have looked at the ceremonial water infrastructures of India, the qanats of Iran, and water strategies of Bangalore and Mumbai.

Our interest in historical water technologies—gravity-fed water delivery systems—is not just a matter of historical curiosity but one of recovering the logics of water as fundamental to city-shaping. The US west depends on huge amounts of energy to import water across long distances, which in turn disrupts the climate and the hydrologic cycle in an unfortunate and unsustainable feedback loop. When we look at history, we are looking for design sense: how have cities sustained themselves on low-carbon and no-carbon water systems in highly variable environments? How have those systems shaped architecture, public space, and social relations? How have they shaped place-specific culture and quotidian resource awareness? Are any of these systems or logics scalable? Could any (or all) of the historical case studies offer us cues and clues about how to re-tool the American western city in a way that overtly reveals its water-fragility, and suggests new habits, new behaviors, new cognizance to its citizen-users?

ALI brings people and ideas together across multiple disciplines, which is a similar concept to the Bogliasco Foundation’s Fellowship program. We believe that bringing together artists and scholars from all of the humanistic disciplines, and from all over the world, in a stimulating environment creates synergy, and that Bogliasco Fellows continue to benefit from this experience long after they leave the Liguria Study Center. Have you observed a similar phenomenon at the Arid Land Institute?

Hadley: There is nothing we would like more than to create a forum for ongoing exchange between designers, scientists, artists, policy makers, historians—anyone thinking in new ways (or recovered old ways) about life in dry lands, globally. The closest we have come to attaining the incredibly fertile cross-pollination that is at the heart of the Bogliasco Fellowships is in our public programming. In 2010-2011, the seminar and lecture series, “Excavating Innovation,” included a photographer, two historians, an urban planner, and three architects. Study sites were in the Americas, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and South Asia. Next year, we hope to host a series called, “Reading the West,” in which we bring together archeologists, geographers, film makers, literary critics, anthropologists, photographers, and writers to look at the western landscape as a

shaper of meaning and identity. These programs won't realize their full potential, however, until we can create an ongoing community of fellows, with opportunity for independent research and sustained dialog; we are striving to fund such a program.

In 2011, the Bogliasco Foundation will celebrate the fifteenth year since the Liguria Study Center opened its doors to our first Fellows. Hadley, you and Peter visited the Study Center ten years ago. Could you please tell us if there are ways that your Bogliasco Fellowships continue to influence you today?

Hadley: The Bogliasco Foundation's enduring impact on us was its commitment to excellence. Along with one or two other periods of work in our lives—working for Tod Williams and Billie Tsien Architects and for Kurt Forster, Tom Reese, and Julia Bloomfield at the Getty Center at its inception, for example—our time as Bogliasco Fellows was so memorable for its high standards: the beauty of the environment; the extraordinary level of accomplishment of the community of Fellows; the dialogue at mealtimes; the impeccable professionalism and hospitality of the staff; the rigorous respect for quiet, fertile creative time. This remains our overarching goal: to build ALI as a resource and a forum that fosters excellence.

What do you think is the most important aspect of a Bogliasco Fellowship? What is uniquely special about a residency at the Liguria Study Center, in your opinion?

Hadley: The Bogliasco Fellowship afforded us a time apart and a time of communion; apart from everyday business, and in communion with each other, our work, and a cohort of colleagues who were similarly detached from the world and engaged in their work. As a kind of secular monastery, it was truly hallowed time.

Did you make any lasting connections with any of the other Fellows? How important was the presence of other artists and scholars for you during your residencies?

Hadley: We have been poor at maintaining the friendships begun at Bogliasco, but that does not mean the gift of the other Fellows' presence has not made a lasting impact on us. Joanne Barkan taught us so much about Italy's political history; John Friedman shared his paintings with us; Paola Loreto taught us 'twinning' in Nabakov; Gianni Cavazzini and his wife instructed us in film and Roman eateries; Stefano Gervasoni shared a musical composition in Milan with us. Perhaps most memorably, Philip Levine taught me how to read a poem. Just one poem: supporting both my struggle with its content and my naïve love of its music, and affirming the value of both the struggle and the song. We cherish our memories of each of those encounters, and the elevated environment that made such encounters possible.

What were some of the highlights of your residencies?

Hadley: For me, three things. First, the cheese. Second: Being visibly pregnant in a culture that reveres motherhood; to be pregnant in Italy is to receive public blessing at every street corner. And third, feeling my baby kick---with gusto!---for the very first time as I stood in front of a Leonardo sketchbook at the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan. I like to think that Josie, now 10, enjoyed the Fellowship as much as we did.

What are some of the ALI's upcoming initiatives, and what inspires you most about the possibilities for the future?

The American Institute of Architects/California Council is partnering with ALI to launch a year-long drylands design initiative: an international design competition, a conference, an exhibition and publication, showcasing design innovation at the nexus of water, energy, and climate change. The initiative is designed to generate a host of strategies for retooling the West in beautiful and sensitive ways, re-adapting us to a resilient life in a water-scarce land. Sprawl has been the west's most enduring global export for half a century. We'd like to think that intelligent drylands design will be the West's next great export.

Thank you!