

Research Report, July 2005

Asterion: A Journey through the Labyrinth:

Summary and analysis of year-two explorations

In July 2005, the summer exploration of theatrical space around the text of R. Murray Schafer's *Asterion* continued. With a research enhancement grant from the Office of the Dean and donations from private sources, I was able to take a small team of students and artists back to the Asterion site and continue the work begun in 2004: exploring the site, involving new people and working on new developments in the structure of the project.

The team consisted of R. Murray Schafer (the originator of the text), Melissa Baron (a University of Guelph graduate student in Landscape Architecture), Samantha Brown (a recent graduate in Theatre and Fine Arts from the University of Guelph), Kate Galloway (a University of Toronto PhD student in Music), Dave Wilkins, J.P. Contois, Claire Heistek (kitchen supervisor), Judith Parker, Tilly Kooyman, Garrick Filewod and students Max Evans, Nicolas Waterman and Taylor Pill. We also had some professional input from Jim Gleason (straw bale contractor) and Tina Therrien and Peter Mack (Camel Back Construction – Straw bale builders and finishers). I also wish to acknowledge the continuing support of Bruce Grant (structural engineer), Ross Kembar (architect). The length of time each was present varied.

Methodology

Working from Schafer's text and paying close attention to the nature of the various terrains that make up the site chosen for Asterion, we are exploring appropriate technologies for constructing a variety of theatrical spaces. The eventual shape of the labyrinth will develop from a combination of these construction experiments and onsite design projects undertaken by the various participants either singly or in groups. Discussion and sharing of ideas will make the process inclusive and will allow us to keep the experiments from straying too far from the spine of the text. This qualitative approach allows for the diversity inherent in the makeup of the team to influence the overall shape and nature of the labyrinth.



We have agreed on a number of basic elements:

1. There are advantages in creating a full size model of some of the areas that are described in the text and to workshop the texts with an actor and a participant within those spaces.
2. The particular attributes of any given section of the terrain will be allowed to influence the design decisions.
3. The work will be allowed to grow as an organic process without imposing restrictions until a certain level of complexity has developed. That level will be defined as part of the process.

The model described below was developed for the 2004 workshop and was followed again this summer. It has been very successful for the past two seasons and will form the basis of our continuing experimentation.

Planning:

In addition to outlining a course of exploration of the labyrinth itself, for each stage there must be careful organization of onsite infrastructure to facilitate efficient use of time and resources. This includes food, shelter, water, tools and materials as well as contingencies.

On Site Work:

Following a general plan yet allowing for as much flexibility as possible, we will alternate periods of

physical work with analysis and discussion.

The Workshop Process:

The possibilities for advancing the design that can be achieved by trying out the ideas using full-scale models and having actors interact with the design elements, can be particularly rewarding. The scale and scope is larger than what would be encountered in any traditional theatre context, as the terrain to be explored covers several acres. All the participants are camping on site, working as a closely knit community which allows for and in fact encourages a high degree of engagement with the process. In 2004, we conducted a structured workshop for invited members of the public. This year was more focused on the development of physical structures so the final weekend was less structured and consisted of a walk through of the spaces and then a contribution to the construction that we had been working on. Both these activities were rewarding for all involved.



workshop wall plastering (from video)

Analysis:

Analysis and discussion involves all the participants and is largely interpretive. There are discussions during the process on a daily basis and at the conclusion, each participant is asked to provide us with a summary of their thoughts and suggestions. This aspect of the documentation takes into consideration the diversity of the participants' disciplines. (Some may submit text, others may prefer to contribute drawings or poems) In addition, my assistants compile daily reports of our activities and ideas. The summaries of each phase will be distributed among the group for ongoing feedback and will form the basis for subsequent stages of development. By publishing the results of our explorations on the Patria web site, I wish to include a broader public in the process and thus to gain additional interest and support, continuing the workshop process over the next three years, and always increasing the number of participants who make up the community.

Site:

The site for *Asterion* is a parcel of land on Schafer's property. There was a focus this summer on the construction of a permanent wall using straw bales and mortar. This was not to see if the construction technique works as by now this technology is well established. Rather it was to gain direct experience with the process to determine the feasibility of this construction method using the resources available (financial and human).

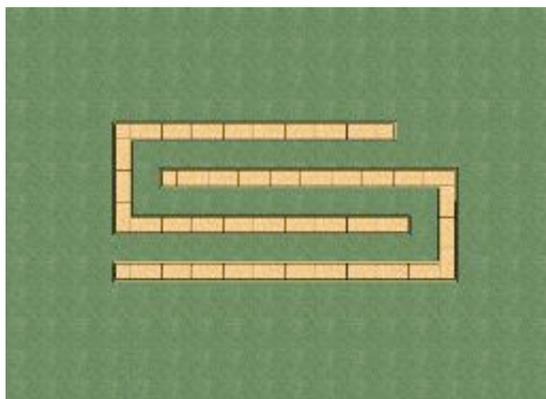
In addition, as the location also provides an ample variety of terrain for exploration including grassy field, cedar woods, wetlands and maple/beech forest we were able to explore further the theatrical possibilities inherent in these environments.

Materials:

Building on ideas developed in 2004 and based on gentle interventions with the existing landscape, we experimented with a range of materials, tools and supplies. These materials include straw bales, rope, twine, tarps, cement, mortar, wire, chicken wire, copper pipes, sand and gravel.



Tools and equipment included rakes, shovels, pruning tools, straw bale needles, pipe-cutters, wheel barrows, buckets, a small cement mixer, some power tools* and levels. As in 2004, we were able to secure donations of a back hoe / front end loader, a water trailer for washing, cleanup and cement mixing and a 4WD vehicle with trailer.



*having no electricity on site, we used the nearby barn and its power for the small amount of carpentry requiring power tools. In future however, we will require a generator or a hydro line to the site.

Initial activities:

We erected a large tent for kitchen / meetings / materials. We had portable toilets and constructed a simple shower with cloth walls. We built a fire pit and had propane stoves for cooking.

There was a strong focus in 2004 on exploring the surrounding landscape. This year there was more attention paid to actual building. The structures developed in the July 2005 workshop included: a “U” shaped straw bale wall (half of the plan shown at right), a ferro-cement sculpture, a segment of a sand and rock mandala and a passageway of hanging copper pipes. A site assessment was also conducted to determine how much of the 2004 structural work (mainly involving onsite organic materials such as pathways, branches, and trees) had remained intact, and what changes had occurred naturally on the site over the past year. As with last year, there was a significant discussion component based on the work we were doing, along with future visions and expectations.

Straw bale wall:

A major focus of this year’s workshop was the construction of a freestanding U-shaped straw bale and cement wall approximately 8 feet high. It forms one section of what will be a series of similarly shaped walls linked to form passages. The process involved several stages including: levelling the ground (with a donated front-end loader), setting up level cement footings, layering 7 courses of straw bales stacked like bricks, pounding the wall with a “bale-basher” to make sure the sides were straight and smooth, tying the bales down with fence wire,



stitching plastic mesh securely to the bales and finally covering the entire structure with cement mortar. The endeavour ended up taking more time than anticipated, and much of the energies from the workshop were funnelled into the finishing stages of this project. However, the construction of the wall was an excellent hands-on learning opportunity affording the type of experiential knowledge not generally provided in books. Straw bale construction is expected to be used for many of the



project's permanent onsite structures, making use of environmentally responsible and energy efficient building techniques.

Ferro-cement sculpture:

There was further experimentation with permanent on site structures in the creation of a ferro-cement sculpture. The sculpture was constructed using metal chicken wire, a cedar tree base and cement mortar to create a horn-like sculpture protruding from the ground, approximately 12 feet high. The sculptural horn was located on the west side of the straw bale wall, and will form part of the entrance to the straw bale passages. The cedar tree serving as the armature for the sculpture was rooted in the ground providing a stable base for the structure, and bowed into a curving horn shape using ropes. Extra branches and boughs were pruned off, the tree was covered with chicken wire and shaped with additional chicken wire spikes coming off the main trunk. The sculpture was then coated with the cement mortar. A part of the living tree extends out of the top of the sculpture as an experiment to determine if the tree will continue to grow further and change the form of the structure.

Sand and rock mandala:

The mandala we started in the 2004 workshop was further developed by two *Asterion* participants in the 2005 season. Based loosely on Tibetan sand mandalas, ours is situated in a naturally occurring open circular space about 25 feet in diameter along the edge of the forest. It is enclosed by young trees (10-15 feet high), grasses and wildflowers with a young willow tree in the centre. The space is open to the sky. The sand and rock mandala created this year is meant to form one section of a larger circle, somewhat like a slice of pie. This version provided visual and tactile properties with the layout of the rocks and mobility of the sand. It encourages the "neophyte" (as the audience members are called in the text) to interact with the space through touch, quiet meditation, or perhaps to create their own slice of the mandala in addition to the existing one. Another significant feature of this mandala is that it is ephemeral, being modified by weather and animals or humans passing through the site resulting in change over time.

Bellum (Forest of Brass):

"Bellum" was a structural experiment derived from Schafer's text. It is located in a section of the labyrinth discovered in the 2004 workshop with a wide clear path lined with large cedars we called the "cedar arcade." Here, a few 2005 participants suspended sections of copper piping of varying lengths through which the neophyte must pass. The pipes ring like chimes, reflect light, move in the wind and provide smooth cool surfaces to touch. This resulted in an interesting sensory experiment – simple but very effective. From a distance we discovered the pipes are indistinguishable from their surroundings and fit well with the site context. The location of "Bellum" was chosen for its long straight passage, dappled light, overhanging branches (for enclosure and structure to hang pipes from), surrounding quietness, and the dramatic cathedral-like effect from the tall cedars lining the pathway.



The Final Weekend

Less formal than last year and probably future years, the final three days where additional participants are invited to join us was nonetheless useful for all of us.

Five new and returning people joined us for a tour of the site and contribution to the ongoing build. The tour of last year's work revealed changes including the weathering effect of one year, natural growth and erosion and the resulting changes in colour and texture. A new development was a section of cedar trees bent inwards from weight of the winter's snow and ice.

The process was documented with notes, video and photographs. I will add the summaries of the participants as they become available.

SSHRC Fine Arts Creation Grant.

This year I was awarded a grant from the new SSHRC Fine Arts Creation program which will allow a significant increase in the activity of the Asterion project. Starting in September of this year, I will hire student assistants and begin plans for the next three years.

Conclusions:

The 2005 *Asterion* workshop continued to build on the momentum of work done last year. There were many successes derived from ample hands-on learning opportunities, combined with space for creativity, discussion and reflection. Some outcomes of this workshop included:

- Some new, and some returning members of the *Asterion* community, contributing to the potential for the development of group leaders for *Asterion* workshops in 2006 and beyond.
- Experimentation with new (to us) construction possibilities including straw bale and ferro-cement structures, copper tubing and sand/rock sculpture.
- Further exploration of the space and potential relationships with the text.
- Assessment of the work done in 2004 and how the site changes over one year.
- Building on the ideas growing from group discussions and the body of knowledge gained from practical experience, planning will now begin for the next phase
- Documentation and publication of the results on line will be ongoing.

