

## 1. Statement and description

From landscape to critical zone: reading, modelling and observing.

*"[...] the normalisation of things, that is the distortion. A distortion of distortion. Being in a place, being in an era, for instance in an era of mass extinction, is intrinsically uncanny. We haven't been paying much attention and this lack of attention has been going on for about twelve thousand years, since the start of agriculture, which eventually required industrial processes to maintain themselves, hence fossil fuels, hence global warming, hence mass extinction".*

*Timothy Morton, All art is ecological, 2021:14*

The action suggested below is part of a pedagogy introduced in the 3rd-year architecture studio at the MSA in the 2023/24 academic year. It is grounded in the idea that if we want to envision an alternative model of planetary habitability (Latour, 2019), we should start by looking beyond the urbanised world in which most of us live and getting closer to the 'landscape', investigating what occurs within it. The brief is designed to enable students to develop their projects remotely, but it can be significantly enriched by direct experiences gained through site visits.

The pedagogy challenges our understanding of 'landscape': not just a 'quantity' of land from which to extract resources, nor just 'space' (as opposed to the concept of 'place') viewed from a privileged point (such as the vista of landscape paintings or the aerial view provided by Google Maps); nor is it merely a synonym for 'nature' that perpetuates the separation of human beings from the rest of the environment (Ingold, 2020). Instead, students are introduced to the notion of the critical zone as both a scientific, philosophical, and political concept articulated by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (2020). For these authors, the use of 'critical zone' rather than terms like territory, land, or landscape has the power to question and prompt reassessment of our interdependencies (Stenger, 2020) with the 'world we live in' and 'the world we live of', the places we inhabit, and the geography of locations from which we extract the resources that sustain our lifestyles. While these interconnections operate on a planetary scale, the term 'zone' conveys its fragmentary, patchy, and discontinuous nature, aligning with architecture's potential to engage with the specific and the fragmentary – the critical zone – to accommodate human activities and generate meaningful places.

The pedagogy is structured in two acts of reading the landscape, followed by a third one focusing on development. The first act involves identifying a current human activity or its vestiges on the land, akin to a palimpsest (Corboz, 1983) and to produce a 'field guide', a guide to recognise and explore the relationship between human activity and the landscape. The second act entails reading and apprehending the landscape in which such activity is inscribed by creating a physical scale model. Beyond topographic representation, the model should capture key qualities of the area under scrutiny, conveying experiential, atmospheric, and material qualities of the landscape, becoming a locus and a tool for critically and remotely rethinking the landscape.

The third and final act involves the design response, an 'observatory' – a small building or a collection of pavilions and devices in the landscape – that goes beyond its instrumental value of providing shelter and facilities. To observe is not just to 'watch' but also to perceive and attend: 'to be present'. An observatory, therefore, is not just a shelter but rather a 'device' to provide an augmented experience 'from within' of what surrounds it, what it 'observes', a means to mediate between the world outside and people, creating a frame for

perception and understanding (Pallasmaa, 2018). It can promote recognition of a site, of a landscape, through design (Girot, 1999). The observatory will finally be made an integral part of the field guide, with the aim that designing such structures and including them in a broader narrative will make people more conscious of the landscape and the activities within it. Through the observatory design and the field guide, students can enhance cultural and aesthetic appreciation of the landscape, promote environmental stewardship for conservation and biodiversity, and stimulate climate change mitigation by raising awareness in support of more radical policies and lifestyle changes (Merz et al., 2023).

## REFERENCES

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## 2. Examples of field guides (students work, 2023/24)

Example A - Loch Treig - Topography & Navigation

Students: Emily Earsman and Arun Bhogal

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oSeEeuve5dtfdoAJSnYIxCKvHcolQk9W/view>

LOCHABER



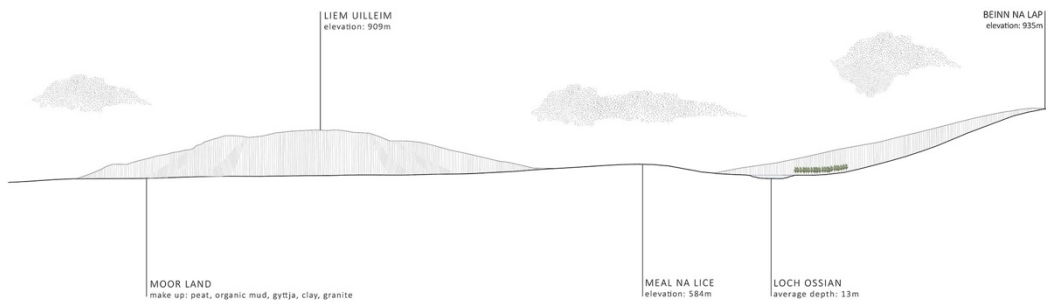
FROM CORROUR TO LOCH TREIG AND BACK



LOCATION PLAN



SECTION A-B



# Example B - Loch Treig - Geology, Exposure & Inhabitation

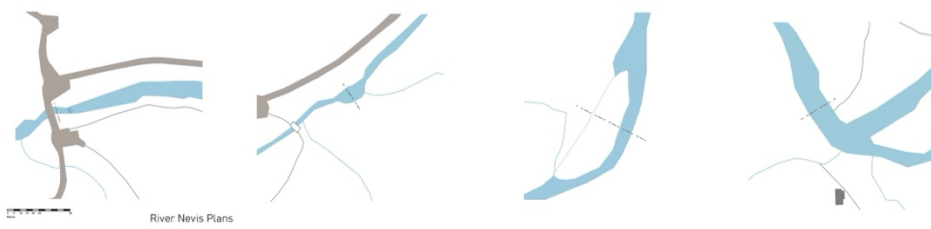
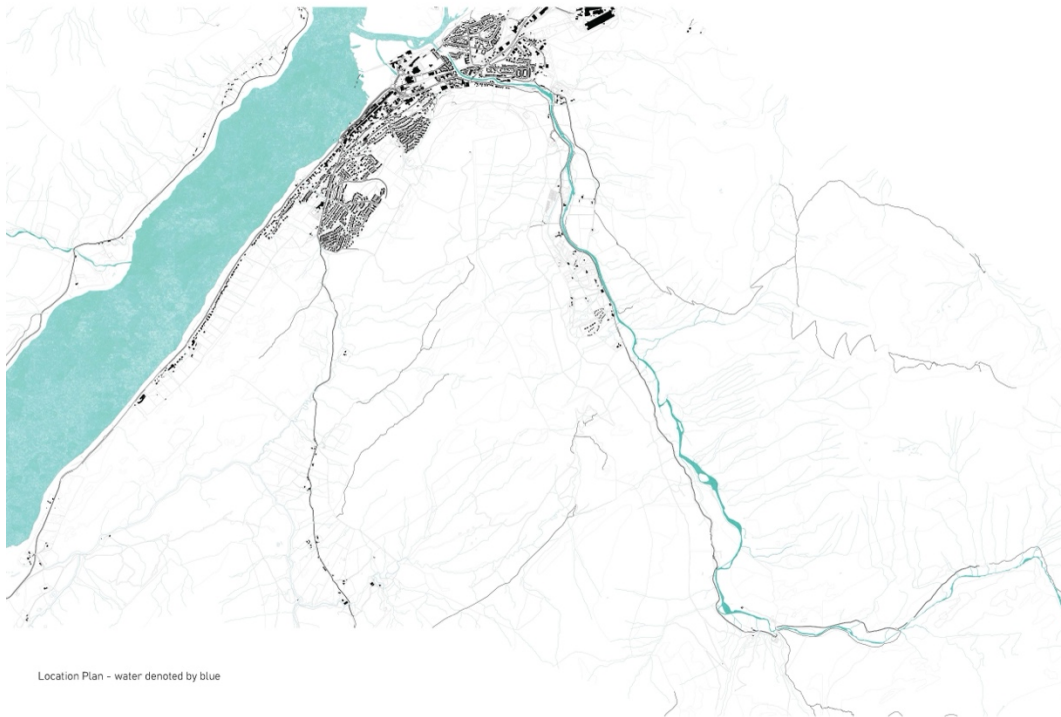
Students: Nada Agal, Daniil Solomou, Anoush Quinn

The project is presented in a grid of 25 panels, organized as follows:

- Panel 1 (Top Right):** A photograph of a steep, rocky mountain slope.
- Panel 2 (Top Row, Middle):** A geological cross-section diagram showing layers of 'Sandstone', 'Siltstone', 'Shale', and 'Gneiss'. A legend identifies colors for 'Sandstone', 'Siltstone', 'Shale', and 'Gneiss'.
- Panel 3 (Top Row, Left):** A map of Loch Treig with a red line indicating a geological profile.
- Panel 4 (Second Row, Right):** Three photographs showing different views of the mountain landscape.
- Panel 5 (Second Row, Middle):** A geological map of the Loch Treig area with a legend for 'Gneiss', 'Siltstone', 'Sandstone', 'Shale', and 'Schist'.
- Panel 6 (Second Row, Left):** A map showing the drainage basin of Loch Treig.
- Panel 7 (Third Row, Right):** A diagram of a building with a chimney, possibly representing a settlement or farm.
- Panel 8 (Third Row, Middle):** A geological map showing various rock types and their distribution.
- Panel 9 (Third Row, Left):** A photograph of a mountain range under a cloudy sky.
- Panel 10 (Fourth Row, Right):** A series of four photographs showing different geological exposures and rock formations.
- Panel 11 (Fourth Row, Middle):** Two photographs of geological outcrops with descriptive text.
- Panel 12 (Fourth Row, Left):** A photograph of a mountain range.
- Panel 13 (Fifth Row, Right):** Two photographs of rocky terrain with descriptive text.
- Panel 14 (Fifth Row, Middle):** A photograph of a large, dark rock formation with descriptive text.
- Panel 15 (Fifth Row, Left):** A photograph of a mountain range.
- Panel 16 (Sixth Row, Right):** A geological map showing the Loch Treig area.
- Panel 17 (Sixth Row, Middle):** A geological cross-section diagram showing the profile of Loch Treig.
- Panel 18 (Sixth Row, Left):** A photograph of Loch Treig with descriptive text.
- Panel 19 (Seventh Row, Right):** A circular diagram showing wind direction data.
- Panel 20 (Seventh Row, Middle):** A geological map showing the Loch Treig area.
- Panel 21 (Seventh Row, Left):** A map showing the Loch Treig area with various features marked.
- Panel 22 (Bottom Row, Right):** A table with data for 'Temperature', 'Humidity', 'Wind Speed', and 'Wind Direction' over a period of 24 hours.
- Panel 23 (Bottom Row, Middle):** A geological map showing the Loch Treig area.
- Panel 24 (Bottom Row, Left):** A photograph of Loch Treig with descriptive text.

# Example C - Ben Nevis - Mountain Range & Watercourse

Students: Amy Turner and Mahdiya Zubairi



## Example D - Rhu, Arisaig – Transhumance

Students: Josh Davey and Jake Alexander



A shieling is a hut or collection of huts on a seasonal pasture. Often found in more mountainous areas the pastures would be used for the grazing of cattle in summer. Seasonal pasturage implies transhumance between the shieling and a valley settlement in winter. They were often beside streams, which were used as pathways into the hills. Each summer when the people arrived with their cattle they were repaired; they made butter and cheese, and gruthin, salted buttered curds.



Construction- Shielings were often constructed of locally available dry stone, or turf. They are mostly rectangular buildings although they may have rounded corners or be roughly oval. The rectangular buildings usually had gabled roofs covered in materials such as turf, heather, or rushes, supported on timbers. The doorway was usually in the middle of one of the long sides of the building, often on the south side; it was often just a gap in the wall.

A Sheiling Song  
Chunacas gruagach 's an aonach  
(Hairy was seen in the fair)

Many times often you and I,  
Have been at the shieling on Brae Rannoch.  
On the hillock of the waterfall,  
Where we were resting.  
In the bothy of the dalliance,  
With a brushwood screen for door.  
My mouth placed on your fragrant mouth,  
And my hand would be round you, my love.



From what we can deduce from the recordings on Tobar an Dualchais, it was mostly the children and the young women of the community who would stay at the àirigh, where they would make butter and cheese from the milk of the cattle, and in some cases – as Angus Henderson of Mull explains – of the sheep.

Historically, this allowed the unenclosed crops in the township to grow undisturbed, and it allowed the livestock to take advantage of the superior seasonal grazing on the hills.

### The Journey



The fitting took a lot of effort, but it was also a time full of excitement, for man and beast:

"The morning we were going to the àirigh, everyone in the village was up early that morning ... the cattle and dogs, horses [...] the cattle ... they knew that they were going to the shieling ... as soon as they were let out, the older cattle headed for the moor"

On the first day the men would prepare the shieling huts, and the women would prepare a meal for everyone who had helped with the move, before leaving the children and younger women once everything was prepared.

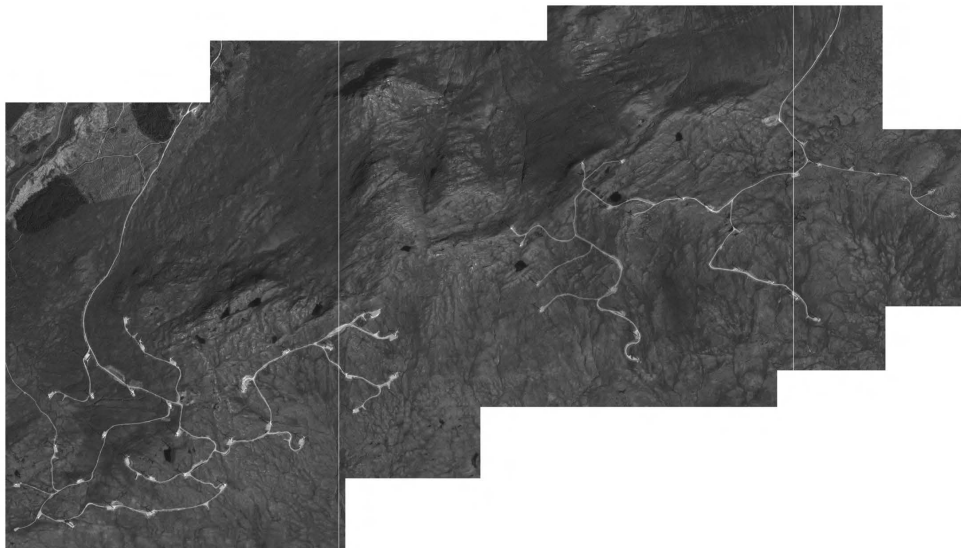


Another 35 small features, sub-rectangular or circular, were also initially thought to be storage, but were probably used in connection with the kelp industry for stacking or burning. (From Survey)

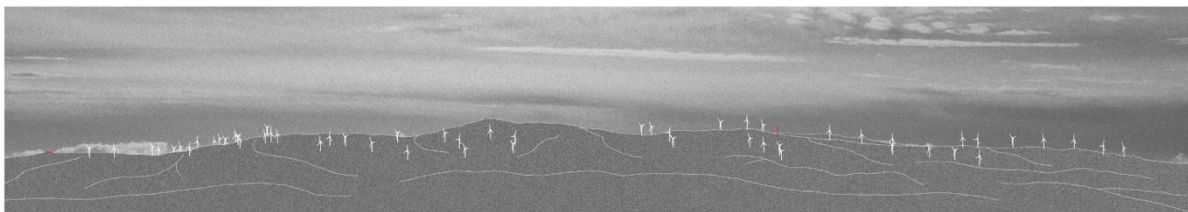
This was an activity for all the family, the men collecting the seaweed, the children dragging it to dry and the women tending the fires. The kelp burning season was June to August, so the seaweed was collected from the winter and spring storms and dried out on low drystone walls (kelp ricks which were covered with a heather thatch to protect from rain) and then stored in rough stone buildings until the summer.

## Example E - Meall Dubh - Imposition

Student: Jonathan Stone



Millenium and Beinneum wind farms straddle across the spine of Meall Dubh. The former was constructed in several stages beginning in 2006, with the last extension coinciding with the completion of Beinneum in 2017, for a total of 58 turbines between the two wind farms. The land is scarred by the tracks which connect these machines, stretching out like ivy upon its mountainside.



Meall Dubh acts as an intermediate between the timeless Highland sense of romantic wilderness, and the encroachment of the modern world. The two wind farms, with their enormous turbines, reframe and redefine the character of the mountain. These forms are both imposing and grand, marking their place in the land and the horizon. They are awe inspiring pieces of engineering, yet are often scorned for their affront to the natural hillscape and silhouette upon the sky. Appreciating the tarsuinn character of Meall Dubh, in all its facets, positive and negative, is to examine the impact of humanity upon the land, which the turbines represent most impressively. Allowing people to access and appreciate these structures from up close and within the context of the mountains of the Highlands, is to open new dialogues about their presence in the land.



### 3. An activity field guide in the landscape

Field guides, described in the dictionary as books "*for the identification of animals, birds, flowers, or other things in their natural environment*", gained popularity at a time when fuelled by fossil fuels, industrialization, and urbanization were drastically changing the landscape and the places in which most people of Britain live. Over time, they became more compact and information-rich, covering diverse topics beyond the natural world.

Continuing this tradition, but aiming to shift from an anthropocentric view that sees 'nature' as separate, you are invited to explore a human activity, whether old or new, within the landscape and create a corresponding 'field guide.' A variety of activities can be found in the Scottish Highlands, often enabled by one of the highest concentrations of privately owned land, ranging from agriculture, farming, and fishing to forestry, extractive practices linked to geology and deep time, transportation and renewable energy infrastructure, and outdoor tourism, among others.

To truly appreciate the landscape where these activities occur, it is essential to adopt a critical understanding of 'landscape.' By connecting an activity to a broader narrative, you can challenge reductive views and question the Western separation between humans and the natural world. This perspective is particularly relevant in the Scottish Highlands, whose perceived wilderness is integral to Scotland's cultural identity and industries like mountaineering and whisky. However, the region's history is far more complex than romanticised images suggest, reflecting a dynamic and long standing interplay of natural and human-driven environmental changes.

Study and represent through drawings, plans, and sections, an area where the chosen activity is situated using OS contour, geology, and natural maps, all accessible online (Digimap). To grasp and interiorise the geomorphology of the place, print the maps at a 1:1000 scale (or similar) and use translucent paper overlays to redraw the contour lines by hand. (example output A) Then use the contours to trace different sections or transects of the land which can offer a distinctive understanding of spatial and visual relations. In sections and transects, you can also 'thicken' the ground incorporating strata from the geological data available online. (example outputs B and C). Visit the site, document your approach, annotate the itinerary, and impressions through sketches and photographs. Aim for a mix of descriptive, factual, practical and measurable information, along with perceptive and sensory records of the journey to and the place itself. (example outputs D and E) Complement this geographical and perceptual evidence with additional desktop research to provide further useful layers of information. Finally, compile all this material into a single pocket-sized booklet—a 'field guide' that not only gives instructions on how to approach the site but also illuminates the connections between the activity and the historical or ongoing impact it may have on the perceived qualities of the place, as well as the geomorphology that supports it and the specific features you have observed in the landscape.

The aim is not just to 'look' at the landscape, but to 'see', through the act of recording and interpreting the traces of geological, ecological and human actions to gain an insight on the context from which a potential project of architectural intervention could arise.