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# STAYING WITH FALLOWS: AN ECO-CENTRIC COMPANION FOR SPATIAL THINKING

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Climate breakdown represents not merely an environmental crisis but a fundamental rupture in our relationship with planetary systems, demanding that we reconceptualise our professional roles and practices, their scopes and scales, within this entangled web of existence. Inspired by the agricultural act of letting land lie fallow to recover and regenerate, this article reframes spatial thinking through fallowness and shared ecological time, moving beyond anthropocentric growth models rooted in capital accumulation to prioritise stewardship over ownership, depth over speed, and care over exploitation.

Aligning with Bruno Latour's ecological philosophy, we turn to the interconnectedness of matter, particularly soil, drawing on the social and spatial organisation of Laxton, Nottinghamshire, where one of medieval England's last remaining open field farming system is still practised. Community-managed fields, with one left fallow annually, resist industrial farming pressures and contrast starkly with neoliberal growth imperatives. Governed by a Court Leet and jury, these fields embody collective ecological stewardship. The biodiversity-rich sykes areas, designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, serve as ecological sanctuaries, while Laxton's farmsteads and nearby dovecotes exemplify architecture designed explicitly for non-human inhabitants, offering historical precedents for multispecies spatial thinking.

Fallow thinking values active rest as a method for cultivating awareness of soil, landscape, and community, demanding responsibility across the full temporal spectrum of earthwork practice. Through these principles, we develop the Fallow Thinking Companion, a design approach that expands architecture's temporal and material responsibilities by proposing a new stage to the RIBA Plan of Work: Stage ∞, offering a model for reimagining sustainable futures through shifts in our understanding of time, causality, control, and cohabitation.

## STAYING WITH FALLOWS

> Fallowing could offer a moment of transition out of the circuit of capitalist value creation and destruction. As we begin to recognise the magnitude of the impact that an ideology of progress has had on the urban fabric, social organisation, ecological processes and the climate more broadly, [the] call […] is for the allied design disciplines — urban planning, architecture and landscape architecture, in particular — to take seriously the idea of fallow by pursuing solutions that lie beyond the capitalist logic of perpetual building and unbuilding.[1]

Climate breakdown demands systemic transformations that broaden the definition, scope, and ambitions of our relationship with Earth systems. This is particularly so with the soil and earthworks for which spatial practitioners hold professional and ethical responsibility, recognising, in effect, that 'architecture is climate'.[2] Architecture has been complicit in perpetuating a flawed modernity that has failed to account for the planet's ecological limits. As Bruno Latour suggests, climate must be understood in the broad sense as the relations between human beings and the material conditions of their lives.[3] Even in conventional sectional drawings, the Earth's complex soil strata appear as blank mass, sharply severed from the building by a definitive line, rendering soil systems marginal and frozen in time. An ontological, ethical, and psychological reorientation is therefore necessary: we must critically examine the current sustainability paradigm, which continues to privilege human concerns over planetary limits. This transformation, we argue, requires fundamentally rethinking our relationship with Earth not as background or resource but as active participant in our spatial practices. Within this context, we advocate that soil must be understood as our common ground from which to cultivate an expanded eco-ethical position, recognising its own intelligence, memory, and regenerative capacities.

Our focus on soil, fallowing, and earth systems responds to a fundamental reorientation occurring across architectural culture. Over the last few years, a remarkable convergence of major exhibitions, conferences, and publications has positioned soil and multispecies thinking at the centre of architectural discourse.[4] This convergence demonstrates that architectural culture is undergoing fundamental transformation. Major institutions now invite us to stand on soil, share space with fungi, and acknowledge non-human collaborators as legitimate design partners. Contemporary architects are reimagining practice from the ground up to include the intelligence of soils, plants, microbes, and ecosystems. This global alignment substantiates our argument that soil must be understood as common ground from which to cultivate expanded eco-ethical positions. Our investigation into fallow thinking, Latour's adoption of Critical Zone studies, and his concepts of the Terrestrial and the Parliament of Things participate in this broader disciplinary reorientation, offering frameworks for architects willing to engage seriously with earth systems and multispecies flourishing.

### *Latour's Terrestrial Turn*

Our engagement with fallowing as both practice and metaphor is grounded primarily in Bruno Latour's ecological philosophy, particularly his concepts of the Terrestrial, the Parliament of Things, and his reconfiguration of human-Earth relations through Actor-Network Theory (ANT).[5] Whilst others have contributed significantly to more-than-human thinking, such as Donna Haraway's sympoiesis

1. Michael Chieffalo and Julia Smachylo, 'Lying fallow: the value of idleness', *Architectural Review*, 11 September 2019 <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/lying-fallow-the-value-of-idleness>.

2. Anthony Powis, Tatjana Schneider, Christina Serifi, Jeremy Till, and Becca Voelcker, *Architecture is Climate* (dpr-Barcelona, 2025).

3. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Polity, 2018), p. 1.

4. The Canadian Centre for Architecture's 'Groundwork' (2022) examined how architects engage with earth as material, territory, and living system; the Van Abbemuseum's 'Soils' (2024) positioned soil across earth, cultural, communal, and spiritual dimensions; the La Biennale de Venezia's 'Intelligens. Natural. Artificial. Collective.' (2025) featured multiple national pavilions explicitly centring soil and earth systems; Somerset House's 'Soil: The World at Our Feet' (2025) explored soil as cultural and ecological archive; and the Design Museum's 'More than Human' (2025) provided a comprehensive examination of non-human species as design collaborators.

5. Latour, *Down to Earth*; Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 2004); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

and situated knowledges,[6] Félix Guattari's Three Ecologies,[7] and Glenn Albrecht's psychoterratic framework,[8] we focus specifically on Latour because his theoretical apparatus offers the most direct engagement with the material and political dimensions of Earth systems as inseparable from human activity.

Latour's call to 'come down to Earth' demands that we recognise ourselves not as masters of nature but as participants within what he embraces in the idea of the 'Critical Zone': that thin, fragile layer of the Earth's surface extending from the vegetation canopy through soil and weathered bedrock to groundwater, where rock, soil, water, air, and living organisms interact.[9] This zone, typically ranging from tens to hundreds of metres in depth, sustains all terrestrial life, yet remains largely invisible to conventional architectural representation and thought. For Latour, the Critical Zone is not background to human activity but the very condition of possibility for existence. It is a space of continuous transformation where geological time meets biological time, where chemical processes enable organic life, and where the non-living and living are fundamentally entangled.

Central to Latour's thinking is his concept of the Terrestrial as a third political attractor distinct from both the Global and the Local. The Global promises universal connection and unlimited expansion whilst abstracting from material realities and local particularities – the modernist dream of escaping earthly constraints. The Local, meanwhile, represents attachment to territory, soil, and borders, yet risks reactionary retreat into exclusive nationalism. The Terrestrial, by contrast, names our actual embeddedness in specific, finite, reactive planetary systems. To embrace the Terrestrial is to acknowledge that Earth responds to our actions, that soils degrade or regenerate, that ecosystems collapse or flourish. Unlike the modernist concept of Nature — that stable background against which human history supposedly unfolded — the Terrestrial is not a passive container but an active participant in shaping the conditions of our collective existence. It also overcomes the Nature/Culture divide by recognising that we are enmeshed in systems that are simultaneously natural, social, and technical.

This recognition demands what Latour terms a 'Parliament of Things', an expanded political ecology that grants agency and representation to non-human entities.[10] In conventional politics, only human subjects deliberate and decide: the non-human world serves merely as resource or constraint. Latour's Parliament inverts this arrangement, insisting that rivers, soils, atmospheres, and species must be recognised as stakeholders in political decisions that affect them. This is a pragmatic acknowledgement and should not be taken as a romantic personification: these entities act, they have interests, and they respond to treatment in ways that profoundly shape human possibilities.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides the methodological framework for this expanded politics. ANT refuses the distinction between human and non-human actors, instead tracing how actants (human or otherwise) form networks through their associations and interactions. [11] A field does not simply exist as passive ground; it is constituted through the networks of seed, soil microbes, rainfall, tillage practices, market prices, agricultural knowledge, and countless other actants. To understand a field requires mapping these associations rather than isolating some essential nature of the land itself. ANT thus offers a way of seeing that refuses to separate matter from meaning, ecology from economy, or nature from culture.

For architecture, Latour's thinking demands a fundamental reorientation. We can no longer design buildings as objects placed upon inert ground. Instead, we must recognise that every architectural intervention reconfigures networks of human and

6. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016); 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (1988), pp. 575–599.

7. Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (Athlone Press, 2000).

8. Glenn Albrecht, *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World* (Cornell University Press, 2019).

9. Latour, *Down to Earth*, p. 68.

10. Albena Yaneva, 'The Parliament of Things', in *Latour for Architects* (Routledge, 2022), pp.105-06.

11. Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, 'Unscrewing the Big Leviathan; or How Actors Macrostructure Reality, and How Sociologists Help Them Do So', in *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology*, ed. by K. Knorr-Cetina and A. V. Cicourel (Routledge, 1981), pp. 277–303.

non-human actants, with consequences that ripple through ecological and social systems. The soil we excavate, the water we divert, the habitats we eliminate or create, and the materials we extract and assemble are not external to architecture but constitute its very substance and effects. To design responsibly within Latour's framework is to account for these networks, to recognise buildings not as finished objects but as ongoing participants in the continuous recomposition of the Terrestrial.

*Fallowing as an Agricultural Practice and a Cultural Metaphor*

To fallow is to let land rest. In agricultural practice, fallowing involves leaving a field unplanted for a season or longer, allowing the soil to recover nutrients, regenerate its microbial communities, and restore its fertility without human intervention. This practice, ancient and widespread across cultures, recognises that productive capacity depends not on relentless extraction but on cyclical rhythms of activity and rest. The fallow field is not abandoned; it is actively managed through its non-use, becoming a space where ecological processes reassert themselves and soil regenerates from within. Yet fallowing extends beyond agricultural technique to encompass a broader cultural and temporal understanding. As Jill Desimini articulates, fallows represent 'the productive potential of letting things lie', spaces where withdrawal from intensive use allows for unexpected ecological and social flourishing.[12] The fallow is neither waste nor wilderness; it occupies a liminal space between human intention and ecological autonomy. Crucially, fallow land becomes habitat: birds nest in the regenerating vegetation, small mammals burrow beneath the topsoil, insects spreading through the diverse plant communities, and fungi extend their mycelial networks through the soil structure. Both on and beneath the surface, nature regenerates, creating rich ecosystems that intensive cultivation would preclude. This recognition of more-than-human life thriving in fallow spaces fundamentally challenges anthropocentric valuations of land, revealing that what appears unproductive by human agricultural metrics teems with biological activity and ecological value. In this understanding, fallowing becomes a practice of attention rather than intervention, of learning to recognise value in what might appear dormant or unproductive by conventional measures, whilst acknowledging that the fallow field is never truly dormant but rather buzzing with non-human vitality.

This theoretical grounding establishes our approach to examining specific fallowing practices. When we examine historical and contemporary fallowing systems through Latour's lens, we look not for quaint agricultural persistence but for functioning arrangements where human practices have co-evolved with soil ecologies, where temporal rhythms serve as negotiated agreements between extraction and regeneration, and where collective governance structures enable long-term stewardship. The question becomes: what lessons can spatial practitioners draw from such arrangements? How might architecture learn to work within rather than against the Terrestrial? What would it mean to design not for perpetual human occupation but for cyclical rhythms that honour both human needs and ecological regeneration? To explore these questions, we turn now to a place where medieval fallowing practices persist into the present, offering a living laboratory for observing the Parliament of Things in practice.

12. Jill Desimini, *From Fallows* (Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 33.




Figure 1. A copy of the 1635 land survey conducted by Mark Pierce, in Laxton Church, photograph by Cagri Sanliturk (2023).





Figures 2. Laxton's Parliament of Things: details from the 1635 survey map showing multispecies landscapes. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. C17:48 (9), Sheet 8 <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/9c37322c-24e9-4cbc-94f5-b38c072619de>, CC-BY-NC 4.0.

## LAXTON: A PARLIAMENT OF THINGS IN PRACTICE

Laxton, a village in Nottinghamshire, preserves one of England's last functioning medieval open field farming systems.[13] This is not heritage performance but living agricultural practice, where approximately 483 acres remain farmed in long, narrow strips (furlongs) distributed across three open fields: Mill Field, South Field, and West Field. Each year, one field lies fallow whilst the other two are cultivated, continuing a rotation system that has sustained this landscape for at least eight hundred years and likely far longer.

The 1635 survey map of Laxton by Mark Pierce, held in the county archives, offers what Latour would recognise as a Parliament of Things made visible (Fig. 1, Fig. 2). More than a historical artefact, the map renders human and non-human actors at equivalent scale: oxen and sheep graze alongside ploughs, dovecotes, windmills stand commensurate with human dwellings, and the soil itself appears as active participant rather than blank ground. This cartographic equivalence reveals a socio-material network where humans, animals, tools, and land constitute the landscape together. Crucially, even documents produced to serve sovereign power and property relations must acknowledge non-human agencies, the plough's capacity, the sheep's grazing patterns, the soil's productivity, because these actants fundamentally shape the possibility of life together. The map's value for contemporary ecological thinking lies precisely here: it demonstrates that accounting for more-than-human agency is not romantic projection but practical necessity, visible even in instruments of sovereign power and control.

Whilst Laxton's open fields are today privately owned (by the Thoresby Estate since 2020, previously the Crown Estate), our interest lies not in current ownership structures per se but in the continued traditions and practices that resist contemporary pressures towards enclosure, intensive monoculture, and individual property logic. Laxton is not untouched by global economic pressures; fluctuating prices for seed, fertiliser, and crops affect farming decisions, yet the open fields continue to endure, preserving their historical, cultural, and ecological value. This resilience reflects the strength of traditional communal practices and their capacity to adapt in the face of modern challenges.

The extent of the open fields at Laxton was once much greater. Initially, they covered around 1,894 acres, but this has now reduced to just 483 acres. A significant reorganisation between 1903 and 1908 saw the individual strips widened, allowing for the use of modern machinery. In 1635, there were 2,280 separate strips, but today, only 164 remain.[14] Strips range in size between approximately one and seven acres. The original dimensions of these strips were not arbitrarily chosen; they were shaped by the physical agency of the plough and the oxen, whose turning radius, strength, and movement patterns dictated the practical limits of arable plots within the open-field system. The holdings of individual farmers today range between 120 and 140 acres. Each farmer holds several strips scattered across the three open fields, ensuring a fair share of both the best and worst land, near and far from the village centre. Centuries-old ploughing and tilling methods have left their mark on the landscape in the form of ridges and furrows, striating the land into distinctive straight and curved lineations.

These practices of collective stewardship, fallow rotation, commons management, and multispecies cohabitation persist despite, not because of, dominant development paradigms. The following sections examine the specific mechanisms through which this resistance operates: the maintenance of commons, the practice of fallow rotation, the preservation of idle lands (sykes), the governance

13. For another surviving open strip field in England, see 'Braunton Great Field', *Devon Historic Environment Service* <https://www.devon.gov.uk/historicenvironment/explore-devons-heritage/braunton-great-field/>. There is also a medieval open strip field system surviving in the township of Laugharne, Wales. See Margaret Davies, 'The Open Fields of Laugharne', *Geography*, 40.3 (July 1955), pp. 169–77.

14. A wealth of original material about Laxton is held across various archives including the Manvers, Tallents, and Denison Collections at The University of Nottingham, as well as Nottinghamshire Archives, the British Library, and other locations; see 'Laxton: Life in an Open Field Village', ed. by K. Summerwill, *The University of Nottingham* <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/mss/learning/laxton/>.




Figure 3. Laxton Church's kneelers, in which community craft represents a Parliament of Things, photograph by Cansu Curgen (2023).

structures enabling collective decision-making, and the architectural precedents for multispecies design found in the region's dovecotes and farmsteads.

*The Commons and the Absence of Enclosures*

In Laxton's open fields, the commons and the absence of enclosures are fundamental to its unique characteristics. Unlike much of England, where common lands were enclosed into smaller plots for private use, Laxton's open fields have largely avoided enclosure, preserving communal farming practices. This unique survival, according to a current Court Leet member and third-generation Laxton farmer, is due to several factors: the heavy clay soil, which discouraged previous landowners from pursuing enclosure; indecision amongst farmers on the best way to enclose the land; and the inability of Earl Manvers of Thoresby Hall to fund enclosure at the time.[15] From 1952, the Ministry of Agriculture managed the estate, choosing to maintain the system. The Crown Estate, which owned it from 1981 to 2020, and now the Thoresby Estate, which acquired it in 2020, have committed to its preservation.

Laxton's history invites broader reflection on the transformative impacts of enclosure movements within a global context. From the late medieval period, accelerating during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, enclosures involved consolidating open fields and common lands into privately owned parcels, divided and enclosed by hedgerows and fences. The origins of this shift can be traced as far back as the aftermath of the Black Death in the fourteenth century, when widespread depopulation led to the abandonment of numerous villages. Here, the agency of a non-human actor — the bubonic plague caused by the bacterium Yersinia pestis — emerges as a pivotal force in the economic and social reorganisation of England, fundamentally reshaping the relationship between people and land.

Historically, the consolidation of land in England mirrored colonial enclosures across the British Empire, where Indigenous practices and ecosystems were disrupted in the Americas, the Caribbean, and India. Though geographically distinct, these processes were interconnected, forming part of a global pattern of land commodification and dispossession.[16] As Amitav Ghosh notes, colonial histories have exacerbated the climate crisis, demonstrating how imperialism facilitated large-scale resource extraction and the exploitation of colonised lands.[17] The colonial legacy of enclosure persists in contemporary agricultural supply chains: practices that were once local and cyclical now depend on global extraction networks, with materials sourced from regions with complex postcolonial ties.[18]

Whilst enclosures aimed to increase agricultural efficiency and profitability from a growth-oriented perspective, they came at the expense of displacing rural communities and dismantling communal systems of land management. Centuries of enclosures deprived most British people of access to agricultural land, displaced animals from expansive, continuous meadows and habitats, and disrupted the soil's regenerative cycles of rest. Before enclosures, under ancient customs, tenants without access to an open-field plot could use common land, provided they could rear a calf. This arrangement afforded them rights to graze livestock, cultivate crops, and gather essential resources. The calf itself thus mediated access to land, survival, and belonging within the rural commons.

Amid this sweeping transformation, Laxton remained as a rare exception, standing today as a living example of commoning practices that have endured for centuries, resisting the dominant paradigm of land as commodity. The absence of enclosures at

15. Anonymous Laxton farmer, interview by the authors, 23 February 2023.

16. Imogen Tyler, 'Enclosures and the Making of the Modern World', *The Sociological Review* <https://thesociologicalreview.org/projects/connected-sociologies/curriculum/mmw/enclosures-and-state-formation/>.

17. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

18. For example, phosphate fertiliser was historically sourced from pigeon guano in dovecotes: a local, cyclical practice. Today, UK agriculture relies entirely on imported phosphate, primarily from Morocco and the disputed territory of Western Sahara, which holds some of the world's largest reserves. This dependence raises concerns around ethical sourcing, environmental sustainability, and supply chain vulnerability. For a critical and an art-led enquiry into the extractive gaze of European institutions and policies, see FRAUD (Audrey Samson and Francisco Gallardo), *EURO—VISION* <https://euro-vision.net/>.

Laxton enables us to witness firsthand the value of shared resources, collective decision making, and long-term ecological stewardship, offering a model that challenges the neoliberal assumptions underpinning contemporary development.

*Fallow Rotation and Shared Ecological Time*

Laxton's three open fields (Mill Field, South Field, and West Field) operate on a rotation system where one field lies fallow each year whilst the other two are cultivated. This rotation has been maintained for at least 800 years, demonstrating that long-term agricultural sustainability depends not on relentless extraction but on cyclical rhythms of activity and rest. Yet contemporary climate breakdown is increasingly forcing fallowness through external pressures. Prolonged summer droughts and dwindling water resources disrupt the medieval rhythm of the three-field rotation.[19] A recent UK study highlights severe soil moisture droughts now extending from approximately four months to seven months, profoundly challenging agricultural calendars, seasonal labour patterns, and cultural practices that have evolved over centuries.[20] This climate-induced fallowness reveals a critical distinction: forced rest differs fundamentally from intentional rest. When drought compels land to lie fallow, it reflects system failure rather than regenerative practice. The intentional fallow (rotated, anticipated, and collectively managed) enables communities to prepare, redistribute labour, and maintain social rhythms alongside ecological ones. Climate-forced fallowing, by contrast, arrives unpredictably, disrupting rather than sustaining community patterns. The question becomes: can we transform crisis-driven fallowness into intentional practice? Laxton's structured rotation offers a template, but one that must evolve to accommodate the Anthropocene's irregular rhythms. This challenge extends beyond agriculture, to all landscape practices: architects, planners, and land managers must similarly learn to anticipate rest rather than have it forced upon them, informed by soil moisture monitoring, seasonal unpredictability, and ecological feedback that earlier generations could not have anticipated.

During the fallow year, the field enters a different temporal register governed by ecological processes rather than agricultural calendars. Nitrogen-fixing plants spread through the field, their roots harbouring bacteria that convert atmospheric nitrogen into soil nutrients. Earthworms proliferate, their tunnelling aerating the soil and drawing organic matter deeper. Microbial communities diversify, establishing symbiotic relationships with plant roots that will support next season's crops. The fallow field becomes habitat for ground-nesting birds such as plover, partridge, and skylark. These processes all contribute to natural fertilisation through the deposition of bird droppings and animal manure, which enhances soil quality, promoting nutrient cycling and enriching the land for future cultivation. After mid-July, the strips in the fallow field are prepared for sowing winter wheat in the autumn. The fallow field thus works precisely through its withdrawal from intensive human use, demonstrating that productivity and rest exist in reciprocal rather than opposed relationship.

This rotation requires coordination across the entire community. No single farmer can decide when their strips will lie fallow; the decision belongs to the rotation itself, to the long-term health of the soil, to future generations of farmers and microbes. This collective temporal thinking, embedded in governance structures and agricultural practices, offers a profound alternative to development models based on individual property rights and immediate returns.

19. Fiona Harvey, 'UK Food Production Down After Record Rainfall, Say Farmers', *The Guardian*, 10 April 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/apr/10/uk-food-production-down-record-rainfall-farmers>.

20. Between 2062 and 2080, these extreme drought events are projected to occur 1.8 to 2.8 times more frequently than historically recorded, signalling that what we currently consider the growing season will endure unprecedented soil moisture stress for approximately half the year. See Magdalena Szczykulska, Chris Huntingford, Elizabeth Cooper, and Jonathan G. Evans, 'Future Increases in Soil Moisture Drought Frequency at UK Monitoring Sites: Merging the JULES Land Model with Observations and Convection-Permitting UK Climate Projections', *Environmental Research Letters*, 19.10 (2024), 104024.

*The Sykes: Permanent Refugia as Ecological Archives*

Each of the three open fields contains areas too wet or steep for cultivation, which are not part of any tenancy and historically provided farmers with space to turn horses during ploughing, often incorporating a cart road or drainage ditch. Scattered amongst the cultivated strips, these areas are known as 'sykes'.[21] These common lands, never part of any tenancy, remain permanently fallow, untreated with chemicals or fertilisers, and classified as 'unimproved grassland'.[22] Many are registered as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Whilst the three-year rotation ensures periodic rest for each field, the sykes represent permanent withdrawal from cultivation, forming a network of ecological refugia dedicated entirely to processes beyond human agricultural intervention (Fig. 4).

The sykes serve multiple critical functions. Their dense vegetation and undisturbed soil provide habitat for diverse species whilst natural drainage ditches regulate water flow, reducing flood risk (Fig. 5). As carbon sinks, they sequester $CO_2$ through undisturbed soil and vegetation. These commons thus contribute simultaneously to biodiversity conservation, water management, and climate resilience.

Beyond these measurable ecological services, the sykes embody a deeper principle: they function as ecological archives. Soil is increasingly recognised as possessing its own form of intelligence, capable of recording past environmental and ecological conditions.[23] Yet much remains unknown about how such ecological memory operates, how information is transmitted across time and space, and what implications this holds for ecosystem resilience and function. Incorporating soil memory more systematically into Earth system models could significantly improve our understanding of land responses to climate and disturbance. In this context, the sykes act as vital ecological archives.

*Stewardship for the Commons: The Court Leet*

Laxton's open fields are managed by tenant farmers under a shared system overseen by the Court Leet, a historic manorial court that ensures fair distribution of land quality, upholds agricultural traditions, and safeguards the integrity of shared spaces, including the idle lands. The Court Leet oversees crop cultivation in the three open fields, appointing a jury of twelve to inspect strip boundaries. On Jury Day, the last Thursday in November, jurors tour the fields, replace wooden pegs, and record boundary breaches. About a week later, they present a report to the steward and bailiff, detailing offences and setting fines. The court also appoints the *pinder*, who rounds up stray animals to the pinfold.

The Court Leet, the last of its kind with full legal powers under the Administration of Justice Act 1977, maintains the open fields under a 'Countryside Stewardship' agreement, protecting the landscape and supporting wildlife habitats.[24] The survival of the Court Leet and its management practices reflect a collective commitment to shared meanings and traditions. Together, they form a unique model that could serve as a reference for an expanded spatial thinking, rooted in an eco-centric perspective: one where the use value of soil and the Earth take precedence over exchange value, and an attuned relationship with cyclical time and nature is acknowledged through the regenerative benefits of fallowing.

The Court Leet illustrates that alternative governance models, rooted in emotional and ethical connections to the land, are not only possible but necessary. It can be seen as a unique model and proof of concept for an eco-centric approach to spatial thinking: one that prioritises de-growth, use value, and regenerative principles in the creation and maintaining of spaces, opting for communal stewardship and mutual care

21. Pronounced as 'six'.

22. Anonymous Laxton farmer (2023) 'On-site interview regarding open field farming practices', Interview conducted on 23 February 2023.

23. Mehdi Rahmati and others, 'Soil Is a Living Archive of the Earth System', *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, 4 (2023), pp. 421–23.

24. Anonymous Laxton farmer, interview by the authors, 23 February 2023.

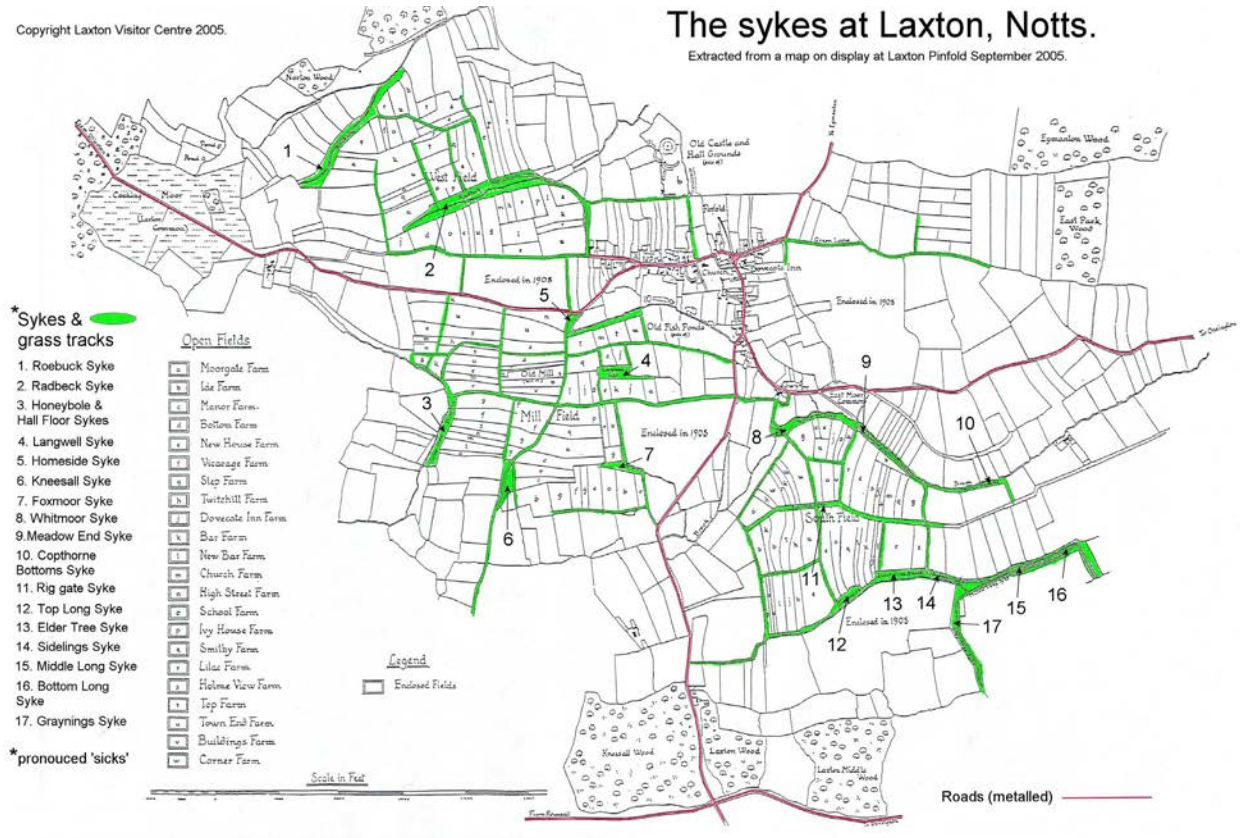



Figure 4. Sykes at Laxton, courtesy of Laxton Visitor Centre (2005) <http://www.laxtonvisitorcentre.org.uk/laxton_sykes.htm>.



Figure 5. Sykes between the open fields, photograph by Cansu Curgen (2023).

in response to climate breakdown. This model of stewardship prompts reflection on how professions that deal with earthworks and built works might learn from such social-spatial organisation. Could we establish collaborative spaces for ecological stewardship within our immediate contexts? By engaging ecologists, landscape architects, and other specialists, decision making could better reflect the complexities of natural systems. The resilience of Laxton's open field system challenges the notion that shared resources inevitably succumb to degradation, offering a practical counterpoint that demonstrates there is 'no tragedy in commons' when collective responsibility and mutual care are in practice.[25]

*Dovecotes and Farmsteads: From Extraction to Cohabitation*

Laxton's open field system demonstrates collective stewardship and ecological thinking operating at the landscape scale: hundreds of acres managed through temporal rotation and spatial distribution. Yet the principles underlying this system, such as the attention to non-human needs, design for cyclical rhythms, and architecture as participant in ecological networks, extend equally to individual buildings. If the fallow field makes space for soil regeneration and avian habitats, what built structures embody similar commitments? How has architecture itself served as explicit infrastructure for multispecies cohabitation?

Beyond the open fields of Laxton, Nottinghamshire's dovecotes and traditional farmsteads demonstrate that multispecies architecture is an established tradition rather than a contemporary innovation. Dovecotes, built predominantly between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, were conceived from detailed understanding of avian biology. Internal nesting boxes numbering in the hundreds or thousands provided individual territory whilst maintaining pigeon social structure. Entrance holes sized for pigeons excluded predators, whilst ventilation, orientation, and thermal mass responded to breeding and comfort needs. The dovecote at Sibthorpe, a village some twenty kilometres south of Laxton within the same Nottinghamshire agricultural landscape, was built in the fourteenth century as part of a medieval chantry college and contains approximately 1,200 nesting boxes. It is the only building of the collegiate complex to survive, standing for more than six centuries; that the structure built for birds outlived those built for its human founders is a quiet lesson in itself. This endurance demonstrates that architecture designed with attention to non-human ecological requirements can achieve remarkable longevity (Fig. 6). Guano collected from droppings provided natural fertiliser, eliminating dependence on extractive mineral networks.

Traditional farmsteads similarly extended species-specific thinking across entire building complexes, with barns, stables, pinfolds, and poultry houses carefully organised to accommodate cattle, horses, pigs, and poultry alongside humans. These structures were designed for economic instrumentality, not ecological ethics, and animals served human productivity, not mutual flourishing. Yet their architectural intelligence remains instructive: they demonstrate that rigorously designing for non-human biological requirements is technically feasible and yields durable results. The challenge facing contemporary practice is translating this architectural knowledge from frameworks of extraction toward what Latour describes as 'composition': recognising non-human entities not as resources for human projects but as participants whose agencies shape shared ecologies.[26] Can we learn from these precedents to adapt lessons for more-than-human living that genuinely embraces, 'the idea that human activities can only flourish alongside other species and systems?'[27] Can we retain the precision whilst transforming the purpose, moving from designing for animals as productive resources to designing with them as ecological co-habitants?

25. Garrett Hardin, 'The Tragedy of the Commons', *Science*, 162 (1968), pp. 1243–48. The Court Leet's successful governance challenges one of the most influential narratives in modern environmental thinking: Garrett Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons', which claimed that shared resources inevitably degrade through individual self-interest. Hardin's thesis, published in 1968, provided theoretical justification for privatisation and enclosure, arguing that only individual ownership could prevent resource collapse. Yet as Elinor Ostrom later demonstrated through extensive empirical research, for which she received the Nobel Prize in Economics, this 'tragedy' is not inevitable: Commons thrive when communities develop appropriate governance structures, shared rules, monitoring systems, and sanctions for violations. See Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

26. Bruno Latour, 'An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"', New Literary History, 41.3 (2010), 471–90 (pp. 473–74, 484).

27. Design Museum, 'More than Human'.



Figure 6. Sibthorpe Dovecote in Newark, Nottinghamshire (Cansu Curgen).

## FALLOW THINKING COMPANION: INTRODUCING STAGE ∞ TOWARDS TERRESTRIAL ECOLOGY

Laxton's survival across eight centuries offers more than historical curiosity; it provides a working model of ecological framework operating at multiple scales simultaneously. The open fields demonstrate temporal thinking that extends beyond individual lifespans, where decisions made today account for soil fertility decades hence. The rotation system embodies the principle that productivity depends on cyclical rest, not relentless extraction. The sykes prove that leaving land permanently outside intensive use creates refugia for biodiversity, sequesters carbon, supports water management, and serves the whole system's resilience. The Court Leet illustrates that collective governance enables long-term stewardship of commons. And the dovecotes show that designing rigorously for non-human species produces architectures of sustenance.

Yet translating these lessons into contemporary architectural practice confronts structural obstacles. Professional frameworks such as the RIBA Plan of Work organise practice through sequential stages that assume forward momentum, productivity, and delivery of defined outputs.[28] There is no stage for withdrawal, for allowing spaces to rest, for attending to long-term ecological regeneration beyond the project brief. There is no acknowledgement that sometimes the most responsible action is not to build, or to design for future decommissioning, or to create conditions for ecological succession. These frameworks position the client as primary stakeholder, whereas Laxton suggests the *Terrestrial* itself — with its soil, its cycles, its multispecies communities — must be recognised as the fundamental actor whose needs exceed all others.[29] How, then, might professional practice be reoriented toward the Terrestrial? This question motivates our proposal for the Fallow Thinking Companion and the introduction of Stage ∞.

Building on our understanding of fallow thinking and Latour's Parliament of Things, informed by Laxton's eco-centric social and spatial organisation, we propose the Fallow Thinking Companion (FTC): a framework of principles, strategies, and actions for cultivating a design ethos attuned to Earth's life systems. Central to this framework is Stage ∞ (infinity), a deliberate provocation that challenges the productivity-driven logic structuring existing professional frameworks. Stage ∞ is not a new sequential step in the RIBA Plan of Work but a fundamental reorientation that operates at three levels:

**First, as ontological ground**: Stage ∞ positions ecological systems such as soil, water, air, biodiversity, as the primary context that precedes and outlasts any building project. Before Stage 0 (Strategic Definition), there is always already the site's ecological reality. After Stage 7 (In Use), there will be the site's eventual return to ecological cycles. Stage ∞ names this persistent ecological ground condition that conventional frameworks render invisible.

**Second, as temporal interruption**: Stage ∞ introduces dedicated periods for rest, reflection, and ecological regeneration that interrupt productivity-driven momentum. This might manifest as pre-design fallow, as extended site observation across seasons before commencing design; mid-project fallow, for pausing to reconsider decisions in consultation with ecologists; or post-occupancy fallow, for establishing protocols for seasonal non-occupation or planned decommissioning.

**Third, as pervasive reframing**: Stage ∞ reorients how we approach every existing stage (0 through 7), introducing supplementary questions throughout: What are we not building? How do non-human species inform the brief? What ecological processes does this design enable or foreclose? What construction methods minimise soil disruption? What species will inhabit this building? What governance structures enable long-term stewardship? How is decommissioning anticipated?

28. *RIBA Plan of Work 2020 Overview*, ed. by Dale Sinclair (London: RIBA, 2020) <https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/resources-landing-page/riba-plan-of-work>

29. Latour, *Down to Earth*, p. 39

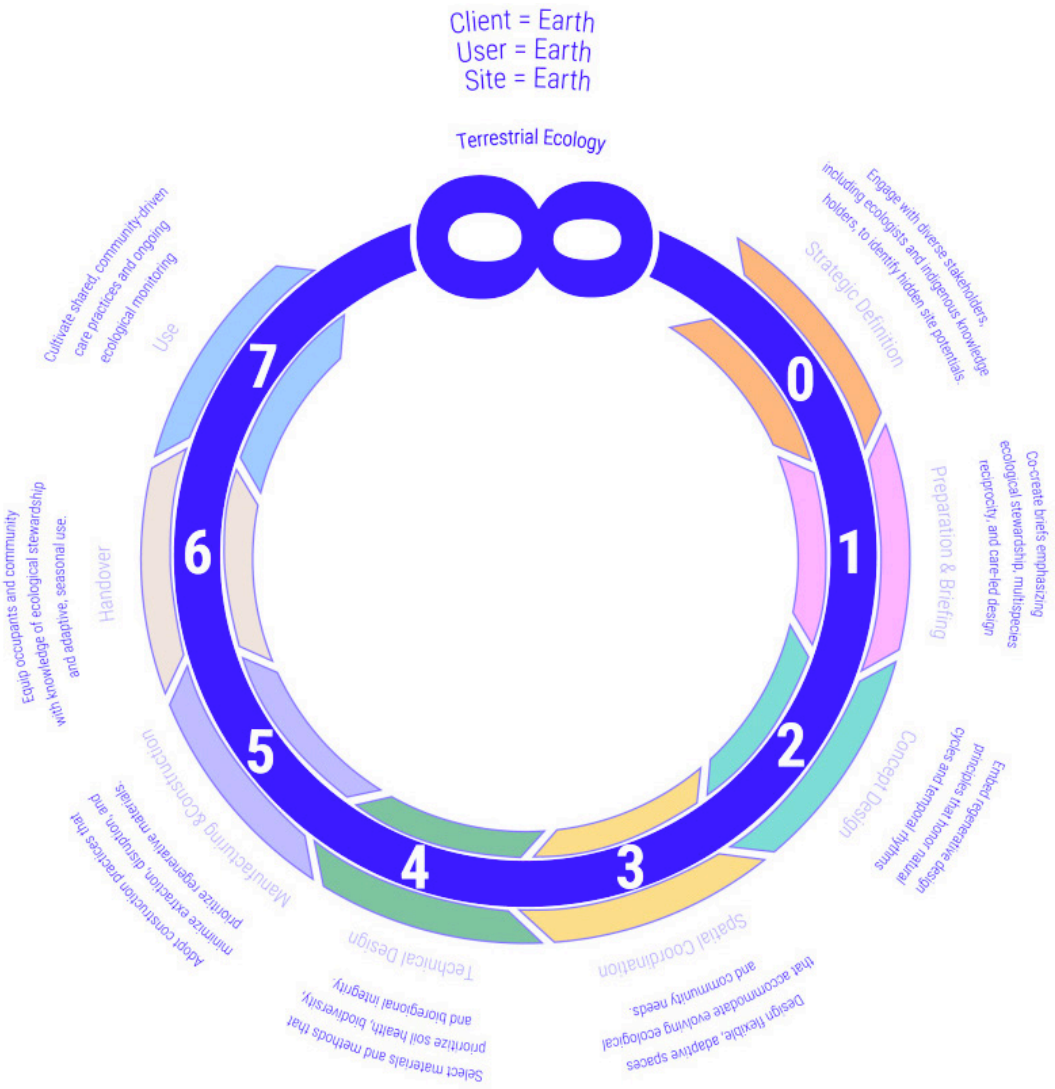



Figure 7. Introduction of Stage ∞ for Terrestrial Ecology into the RIBA's Plan of Work, drawing by the authors (2025).

The infinity symbol indicates that this is not merely an additional stage but a different temporal and ethical register, one that contextualises building interventions within the broader ecological processes that exceed project timelines, budgets, and human lifespans (Fig. 7). Stage ∞ is not proposed as a fallow state for architecture itself but as a fallow condition for the architect: a deliberate suspension of habitual modes of action, productivity, and control to think and act relationally, cyclically, and ethically within living systems. It makes visible what productivity-driven frameworks systematically exclude: periods of non-action, rest, regeneration, and multispecies emergence that occur both before a project is conceived and long after it is completed. It functions as an ethical and ontological ground condition that underlies and intermittently interrupts architectural practice, asking architects to cultivate the capacity to recognise when intervention is necessary, when it is harmful, and when restraint is itself an act of care.

FTC comprises seven core principles that shape a new attitude, decision-making, and behaviour for architectural practice. Each principle concludes with questions that practitioners must address context-specifically (Fig. 8). FTC invites architects to ask several questions: Where can spaces remain fallow, either permanently or seasonally? How is non-use designed into the project? What ecological processes can proceed when human use withdraws? How do we articulate the value of spaces that appear, by conventional metrics, to be doing nothing?

1. **Fallowing is regenerative**: It is not a state of inertia but always in motion, actively creating systems that restore, renew, and enhance the health and vitality of both human and natural ecosystems. The focus shifts from fulfilling human productivity timelines to embracing shared temporal and spatial rhythms with ecological systems.

2. **Fallow space is commons**: Land is part of a multispecies commons, a shared resource that rests, regenerates, and belongs to all as collective benefit and responsibility rather than individual commodity. Just like the fallow open fields and untilled sykes in Laxton, what seems dormant and unproductive for one group is nest and habitat for others.

3. **Active rest is an ethical action**: Fallow thinking advocates the deep responsibility of attending to nature rather than exploiting it. Active rest enables a multiplicity of actions to occur over time that not only restore qualities but can produce new, unforeseen ones.

4. **Relational thinking**: Fallow thinking embodies a holistic, systems-based approach, considering the interconnectedness of all elements, looking beyond the immediate site to understand the broader ecological context, including flows of energy, water, nutrients, and the impact on local and regional ecosystems. Which species currently inhabit the site, and what are their requirements? How does the design support or threaten their continued presence? How are ecologists integrated into the design team from inception?

5. **Long-term thinking (depth over speed)**: Fallow thinking values deep, multi-generational understanding and nurturing of potential over short-termism of rapid results or surface-level efficiency. Prioritising long-term health, resilience, and evolutionary potential of ecosystems reduces the risk of planned obsolescence and perceived waste. What is this building's anticipated lifespan, and how is this temporality embedded in its design? How does it accommodate adaptation to climate change? What governance structures enable long-term stewardship beyond individual ownership?

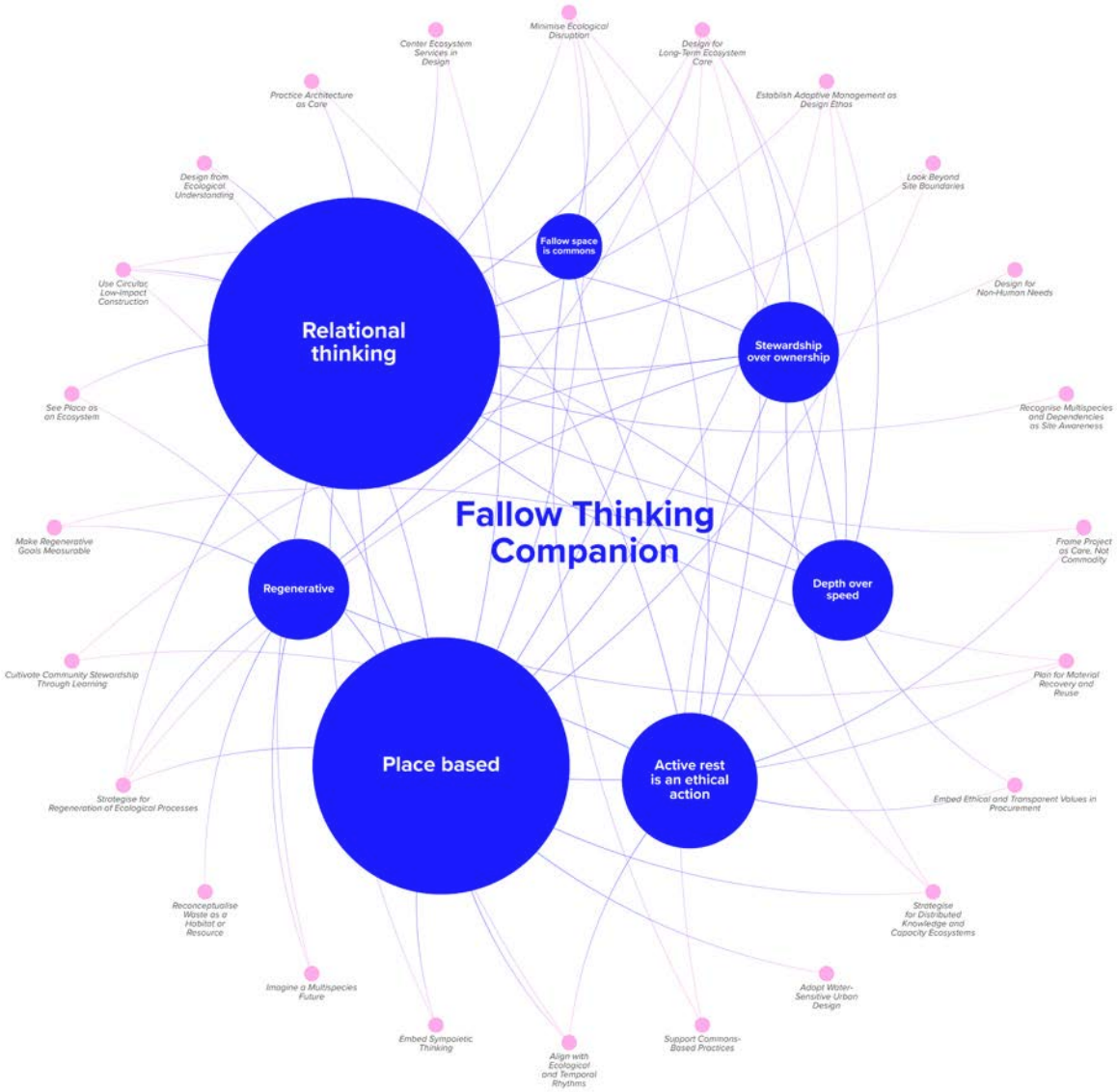



Figure 8. FTC's seven principles and core strategies diagram, by the authors (2025). For the digital, live version see *Fallow Thinking Companion (FTC)* <https://embed.kumu.io/27546f212a1e50719a98ef72bc0dafa0>.

6. **Mutual care (stewardship over ownership)**: Fallow thinking emphasises responsibility, reverence, and a spirit of care for the living world over legal right and control. Stewardship represents a fundamental shift switching to wellbeing over exploitation, interconnectedness over separation, and ethical obligation over commodity. What ownership and governance models best support this project's long-term ecological and social objectives? How can collective stewardship be legally and financially structured? How is stewardship knowledge passed between generations?

7. **Place-based:** Fallow thinking is tailored to the unique characteristics of situated and embodied knowledge within a specific location and culture, working with local materials, respecting natural cycles, and integrating Indigenous knowledge. How is this building designed for eventual disassembly? What materials can be recovered, reused, or safely returned to ecological cycles? How is the site's return to ecological function anticipated and designed for?

These principles form the foundation upon which strategies are built and actions are taken. Fallow thinking, as articulated through the principles and provocations of this article, is not a finished methodology but an invitation to ongoing experimentation and adaptation. It challenges architects to reconsider their relationship to time, value, and authorship under conditions of ecological precarity, asking how we might remain accountable to worlds that continue to live, change, and regenerate long after the moment of design has passed.

This article has argued that fallowing, both as agricultural practice and conceptual framework, offers spatial practitioners a necessary reorientation toward the Terrestrial. Through the case of Laxton, we have seen how eight centuries of collective stewardship, rotating fallows, ecological refugia, and multispecies architecture create resilient landscapes that resist the extractive logic of perpetual growth. Through Latour's Parliament of Things, we have established theoretical grounds for recognising non-human entities as legitimate stakeholders in spatial decisions. Through the Fallow Thinking Companion and Stage ∞, we have proposed practical tools for translating these principles into contemporary architectural practice.

Yet fallow thinking offers no salvation, promises no easy solutions, claims no comprehensive answers. It offers something more modest and more essential: a framework for asking better questions, for cultivating attention to what matters across timescales that exceed individual careers and market cycles, for participating responsibly in the continuous recomposition of the Terrestrial. What happens next depends on whether we, as spatial practitioners, can embrace the vulnerability of admitting we do not have all answers, the humility of learning from soil and species, the courage to challenge professional structures that inhibit responsible practice, and the patience to sustain commitments across generations.

The Parliament of Things awaits our participation, but it will not wait indefinitely. The Earth responds, not to our intentions but to our actions, with consequences measured not in project delivery dates but in the flourishing or collapse of the systems that sustain all life. The sykes teach us that permanent refugia matter. The fallow fields teach us that cyclical rest enables productivity. The Court Leet teaches us that collective governance enables long-term care. The dovecotes teach us that non-human species have architectural requirements we can meet. The question this article leaves open is whether architectural practice is willing to act on these lessons.

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