

>> Thickening the surface - or, what is an 'ecological landscape' exactly?

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The city is no longer something we can understand as architecture; as a mass of formed material that we can distinguish from a non-material void which can be characterized as countryside or periphery – or as in any event ‘not-city’. We are speaking of models of course: it is by way of our models that we come to grips with things, and how we prise open the secrets of their processes of formation and transformation. The city is no longer the walled citadel, if indeed it ever was. Today, the city subverts every bounding order we try to impose on it; it has spilled outwards and has invaded everywhere – and where it isn’t in an immediately obvious way, well, it no doubt soon will be. We are being forced to look at the city’s development (I could say *self*-development) less as a matter of plans and extensions, more as an erupting and fibriform growth over a landscape seen at global dimensions – something a visitor from the next galaxy might mistake for an invasive contagion on the surface of the earth. A materialization, like the growth of a mold or a lichen, appears from the zenith view, to be actualizing a pattern of a virtuality that runs far ahead of it; like a biological or ecological growth it actualizes the patterns of real potentials already given.

We have unleashed a creature with its own volition – an order of an other nature constructing its own form. And any clear-eyed prospective view of our urban future over even the medium term could only induce panic in those who claim to master this force running ahead of our control. Clear-eyed perspectives are in short supply though as we focus on defined parts, neglect oblique and opaque views, and the unintended effects emerging in an undefined and always elusive in-between – and hang on to imaginings of citadels and architecture. By restricting our perspective – by limiting our concern to what is bounded by the limits of the paper or screen – we can imagine we are still shifting the city to an order defined by us, while at another level something residual and self-constitutive goes on relentlessly invading, while it surreptitiously redefines the spaces of our inhabitation, and remediates the relationships of both us and our places with both global and local.

Landscape urbanism aims and claims to engage with the city as an ecology; as a problem of interrelations and dynamic surfaces and wholes. The aim is to mobilize “landscape’s conceptual scope; ... its capacity to theorize sites, territories, ecosystems, networks and infrastructures, and to organize large urban fields. In particular, thematics of organization, dynamic interaction, ecology, and technique point to a looser, emergent urbanism, more akin to the real complexity of cities and offering an alternative to the rigid mechanisms of centralist planning.”¹ While we can only applaud the sentiments, there remain large question marks with regard to the conceptual apparatus supporting this vision, and its efficacy. It is quite clearly

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not enough to turn from a city of hard surfaces and buildings with parks inserted, to one of parks and infrastructure with buildings inserted. We have already been there; I do detect a sneaking admiration for Corbu's urban vision of machines for living in a sun-lit arcadia. Le Corbusier's mistake was not in his dreams of open air and open spaces, intended to release the spirits of men and women from their subjection to the smoking factories, the squalid alleys and choking crowds of the 19th century city; his mistake was in thinking that the surface of his new urban landscape was of the same order as that of the drawing table on which he sketched his utopic imaginings. His was an error of the understanding of *ground* – of the background or negative to the figured objects of his architecture.

Graham Shane reminds us that one of the origins of landscape urbanism is in the technique of aerial photography, developed in Germany in the 1930s as a way of seeing urban regions in a new way. The landscape becomes surface, both human and natural construction; shaped by natural forces such as water run-off, as well as by human inhabitation and production. The mapping of differences in this surface give us patterns of edges and contours that collapse topography, nature, and human settlement into one singular frame of patchworks and gradients. We see demonstrated again that notions of 'ecology' and 'ecosystem', when applied to the environment, begin immediately to blur the distinction we are accustomed to placing between the realms of nature and culture. The notion of 'system' has, as Katherine Hayles has also pointed out, been one of the most powerful forces for the emergence of a 'cybernetic' perspective which deconstructs Enlightenment distinctions of the natural and the cultural.² The landscape becomes a whole, a total field of concern, where the demands of both culture and nature have to be taken into account and "balanced." But what we are dealing with here is still a surface; more complex and considered and overtly hybrid perhaps than that of the modernists, but still a surface with no clear idea, beyond the act of design, of how materialization happens. There is no notion of how the landscape may itself differentiate and form come into being.

"Within such layered ecological landscapes, designers envision new patches of activity or 'commons', public spaces shared by urban actors. ... [D]esigners provide the 'event setting' enabling events through support systems and effectively robotic, prosthetic urban devices that shelter and service the event in temporary structures."³ The surface is a ground plane we divide and delimit, and which is allocated to and serves competing demands as they are imaginatively understood and interpreted by an active agency subsumed in the notion of design. What landscape urbanism misses in fact is any viable notion of a form of *the landscape* as a background to the figured activities on it. What landscape urbanism misses is a handle on any 'natural' formative process of the landscape itself. Graham Shane begins to acknowledge this: "The recent discourse surrounding landscape urbanism does not yet begin to address the issue of urban morphologies or the emergence of settlement patterns over time. It concentrates on their disappearance and erasure [in the contemporary periphery]. The problem of this approach is its amnesia and blindness to preexisting structures, urban ecologies and morphological patterns. A common ground is useless without people to activate it and to surround it and to make it their commons."⁴ Shane begins here to raise the problem of *presence*, and to expose the weak point in the arguments of Bernhard Tschumi, Rem Koolhaas, Adriaan Geuze and many others who see our cities becoming organizations in 'personal diary spaces'; with a flat neutral space being made available for personal appointments between connected people, not to mention organized mass and group events – witness the orgy of out-of-town music festivals that have already become a feature of so many of our summers. In reality, of course, all places are *not* equal, and urban activity responds to this inequality. All urban activity is *not* diarized or programmed and certainly not organized as a mass event in an amorphous commons. Still today most public space activity is sustained in places which exert their own power of gathering.

How do we conceptualize all this? – how do we understand a landscape which distributes its own forces and intensities of activity, as well as its processes of growth and change? I think we can understand intuitively that these things may be linked, and as it becomes more and more difficult in our explosively urbanizing world to sustain a notion of a pure nature and a *natural* ecological or ecosystematic form, we find we have to ask ourselves some fundamental questions about the models we use to understand these processes. We understand well today the extent to which our natures and our landscapes are man-made – and how most of them have been man-made, certainly in Europe, since Neolithic times. We need to resist the temptation to indulge ourselves with myths of Eden, just as we must resist the myth of the village or the small town and its ‘community’, as we ask ourselves just what this ecological landscape *is*.

In fact the landscape is never, and has never been, either primordial or innocent of our constructive intervention. It is not only that we build, either by design, or by default and neglect, the landscapes we see around us; it is also that we could not even see what we understand as landscape, without the constructive effort we put into giving it the form we perceive. This is not to return to an idea of the amorphous landscape to be sliced up according to the meanings and intentions we impose on it. And it is not only that environmental form and meaning cannot be separated because in a diverse population differences of the attribution of meaning must occur – one of the reasons the project of quantitative geography failed. It is a question of the fact that meaning must always *precede* form in the very perception of the landscape.

This is because human beings, like any beings in point of fact, necessarily construct, in ways which are specific to them, what reality is *for* them.⁵ The landscape is never the environment itself, but is always a certain culture-specific, individual-specific, species-specific relationship we have with it. It is an act, something we do, not something that simply is. Any ‘pure’ underlying environment (something we won’t ever have access to) remains the base which necessarily founds the landscape – in Heidegger’s terms this is equivalent to saying ‘earth’ founds ‘world’⁶ – but, no less necessarily, this environment must be predicated, it must be done, declared, constructed, in order to exist for us as our landscape and ‘world’. That is, as reality. Augustin Berque puts it well when he says: “Landscape is not the earth itself, as was posed by the modern scientific view. It necessarily supposes human predication, and in this sense, distinguishing ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ landscapes is absurd. There is nothing like ‘natural landscapes’, because, were it only by the fact of perceiving it, we necessarily predicate the earth into a human world. Ignoring this – i.e. reducing reality to the real – leads to the inhuman absurdity of a world without human existence. This is the deadlock of the modern paradigm, which we have to overcome. On the other hand, landscape cannot be reduced to a merely cultural construction, or a pure predicate, because it necessarily supposes nature as its foundation. The logic of place alone, as well as postmodern (de)constructivism, do no more than capsizing the modern paradigm into a phantasmal metabasism; they do not overcome it.

“In other words, landscape is what Zong Bing had anticipated: it is both a substance (that is a subject), and more than a substance (that is a predicate). This is to say that, for studying landscape, and the *ecumene* in general, we have to overcome the modern reduction of reality to the real. As physics itself has come to show, the real is unknowable, because it is unpredicable. Reality supposes the real, but also its predication by human existence. Landscape is a perfect example of this complex relationship, and this is why, outstandingly, it shows the way beyond modernity.”⁷

What this leads us to is a reflexive landscape ecology which includes the subject and the perceptual as necessary constituents of the ecological. It resolves shallow misunderstandings of the nature of the urban landscape as a relational system.

Shane, reflecting this widespread misunderstanding, measures industrial and social organization against an organization of the urban landscape understood as objective, instead of seeing both as activities, meeting tangentially in places. He finds too easily a link between globalizing and dispersing production processes for example, and the dispersal and dissolution of the contemporary city into the landscape. Why on earth, in this age of pervasive connectivity and mobility, should we believe that there is any one-on-one relation between particular processes of production or society and their logistics, and the material and perceived form of the city. Organizations, whether we speak of a firm, an institution, a working community, a family, are intricate and highly specific and often idiosyncratic constructions. Actions and contacts and exchanges within these organizations are highly particular and directed to highly particular goals and the overcoming of highly particular obstacles. Choices of media through which actions, contacts and exchanges are made are open, tactical, even opportunistic. The urban landscape is one of presence and availability – of the possibility *for* action – rather than any reflection of any achieved action. There is no necessary reason why compact cities or city areas – Saskia Sassen shows in fact cases of this⁸ – should not enable dispersed social and industrial and financial processes as well as if not better than sprawling cities.

The relational system of the urban landscape is one which simply *opens* choices and possibilities to the subject situated within it. And it opens those choices in a way which emplaces the subject in a frame of intentionality – an “arc of intentionality” in Merleau-Ponty’s terms – which draws subject and the object of his or her action, contact or exchange, into a singular situated event. We are talking pure space-time; the event is a nexus, given in a quantum of space-time. But it is a quantum of space-time that may involve places distant from each other at neighborhood, city, national, or even global scales. Part of the global or national or metropolitan *condition* of places therefore, is the way they are space-time synchronized with other places distant from themselves – and this synchronization is itself a work of organization and technics.

The organism implied is not (or not just) that of the fluid flows and exchanges that were evoked by Louis Kahn, or of the *terra fluxus* of James Corner. Flows necessarily play a role in this, but they are of the body of the *city*, not of the immediacy of personal lives or of human action. Flows cause cities to pulse and flex to hourly and daily rhythms. But they flow against counter-flow, and are urban rather than human events; they are of populations, not people. We are not (or not only) concerned with a mechanics of flow over a singular surface – which could only in the end make of space-time a singular rhythm to submerge and dominate the authentic multiplicity of the world and its perspectives. We are concerned with the skeins of space-time of performed activities, and the way these are co-organized. And the urban relational system becomes a holding together in simultaneity of perceptual worlds – perceptual worlds consisting of synchronized places within which distantiated action becomes possible.

Distance and its friction are not the point – instead places are places – global places are global places, metropolitan places are metropolitan places, and neighborhood places are neighborhood places – by virtue of the fact that they are synchronized with other places. We need to remember the role the railways and their timetables played in consolidating a national space and creating national cities as places in the 19th century; we need to remember the role telecommunications have played in consolidating a global space and creating global cities as places in the last century. It is not that the distances and times between places have become ‘compressed’ – it is that the places themselves are *in sync*. They are simultaneous! The delay in getting people, money and messages from one place to another constitutes only a ‘fuzzing’, and an element of uncertainty in this simultaneity, and induces an factor

of risk that needs to be dealt with by the bodies and organizations that make use of this simultaneity. We use and are involved in very many kinds of organizations which distribute their workings through discontinuously connected places like this – places which don't necessarily have a continuous inter-wiring – all the time. And we wouldn't be able to operate in the world without them. Our confusion about these places and about the ways they work is precisely due to our equation of the Cartesian spaces of distance with the spaces of our imaginations and inhabitations. Remember, these global, metropolitan and neighborhood places are not only imagined, they are also *realized*!

Gradually a viable – though admittedly speculative (just like all the others) – answer to the question of what this ecological landscape might be, begins to suggest itself. It becomes a 'connective tissue' of space-times, holding together structures of synchronized places. This is the order of the pattern we see emerging on the surface of the earth – a fractal-like tracing out of structures of places that are not so much nodes as thickenings in the webs which constitute the tissue. This is a cybernetics of the urban surface that locates us, *emplaces* us, in an order of places that affords our action. We become actors whose powers of agency are given by the networks of distributed-and-synchronous places we have to hand.

This becomes an organic order of the landscape that turns the organic cities of Geddes, Mumford and Lynch on their heads. This organicism makes a nonsense of geographic boundaries, and it has nothing to do with a bounding based on a metaphor of the organism as we have been accustomed to understanding it. It is not the skin of the organism that makes it functional and self-sustaining. Identity is not even an issue here; all organisms have multiple virtual and real identities which refer to situation rather than to any closure of the boundaries of the organism. This is not about a functional interrelationship of parts; this different organic imposes no limit on the sizes of parts or whole. In fact it eschews limits altogether and finds that, to quote Alfred North Whitehead, "[t]he notion of 'organism' is combined with that of 'process' in a twofold manner. The community of actual things is an organism; but it is not a static organism. It is an incompleteness in process of production. Thus the expansion of the universe in respect to actual things is the first meaning of 'process'; and the universe in any stage of its expansion is the first meaning of 'organism'. In this sense an organism is a nexus. Secondly, each actual entity is itself only describable as an organic process. It repeats in microcosm what the universe is in macrocosm. It is a process proceeding from phase to phase, each phase being the real basis from which its successor proceeds towards the completion of the thing in question."⁹

Kevin Lynch, taking his cue perhaps from Maturana and Varela, or Ernst von Glasersfeld, though he doesn't credit them, claims that "while [an organism] has a sharp external boundary, it is not so easy to divide it internally"¹⁰ – in fact we understand from Whitehead that external boundaries are just as difficult to find as internal ones. Lynch understands the organism as a balanced and *homeostatic* system, internally adjusting in order to always return to a state of stability. This organic model is metaphoric, with organs, parts and dependent sub-parts that fit into a functional diagram of interdependency. The alternative model is *machinic*, to use Gilles Deleuze's word: it is understood in terms of the relations between components, relations that are not necessarily dependent upon the components themselves. And this model is *homeorhetic*, to use Conrad Waddington's word: it is bound up with process pathways that gather material into patterns of co-development over time. It is a diachronic and concrete process of formation, capable of bifurcations and non-linearities. And its product is one not so much of evolution as of *involution*, of folding-in; it collapses as much of the world as it can into the nexus of its own situation.

scape urbanism misses. It is the factor of microcosmos that the non-places of the contemporary urban landscape is short of – and here I am talking about all scales, not just that of the global which has become almost universally pervasive. Here the metaphor of the ‘sacred site’ is indeed closer to the mark than that of Geddes’ or Mumford’s or Lynch’s ‘organism’. Not of course the sacred site that encloses and isolates, but the one that captures and repeats a world gathered to itself from along its coordinate axes, and the one which gathers together and to hand all the treasures of a multi-scalar macrocosmos in a sustaining and affording microcosmic place. Bruno Latour calls this place the *oligopticon*: it is a place through which the world passes, for the sustenance of that place and our situated selves, and for our very sense of being in-place. And it is a place from which we go to a world which is immediate and present and to hand.

All the bulk of the organism and its circuits and organs and parts are doing is providing mechanisms of capture for sustaining the microcosmos: organisms don’t hold themselves against a world; they fold the world to a nexus. This is the difference between inner urban areas like the Pijp in Amsterdam which I describe in my forthcoming book,¹¹ and the dead places of the bounded neighborhoods built to another erroneous model. What the Pijp, and other neighborhoods like it do is fold the world to themselves in a deepening of the surface. They suspend microcosmic worlds within worlds and gather the wealth of the global, the metropolitan, and other larger scales to a local which actualizes those worlds and renders them to hand and available. Urban place becomes a phenomeno-technical nexus whose power is given in the way it affords multiple actions which involve the synchrony of the actor with the larger world into which he or she acts. The power of place, in other words, is given in the way it facilitates its own predication.

Endnotes

- 1] James Corner (2006), “Terra Fluxus”, in; C. Waldheim (ed.), *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, p. 23.
- 2] N. Katherine Hayles (1999), *How We Became Post-Human*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- 3] Graham Shane (2005), *Recombinant Urbanism*, Wiley-Academy, Chichester, pp. 69-70
- 4] Graham Shane, “The emergence of landscape urbanism”, in; C. Waldheim (ed.), *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, p. 63.
- 5] See: Jacob Von Uexküll (1992 [1934]), “A stroll through the worlds of animals and men,” in: *Semiotica* 89 (4), pp. 317–377.
- 6] Martin Heidegger (1971), “The origin of the work of art,” in: Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter. Harper and Row, New York.
- 7] Augustin Berque, “Overcoming modernity, yesterday and today,” in: *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 1,1, pp. 89-102. Also: www.isc.senshu-u.ac.jp/~the0043/Landscape.pdf
- 8] Saskia Sassen (2001), *The Global City*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- 9] A.N. Whitehead (1979), *Process and Reality*, Macmillan, New York, p. 327.
- 10] Kevin Lynch (1984), *Good City Form*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., p. 89.
- 11] Read (2007), *Urban Life*, Techne Press, Amsterdam.