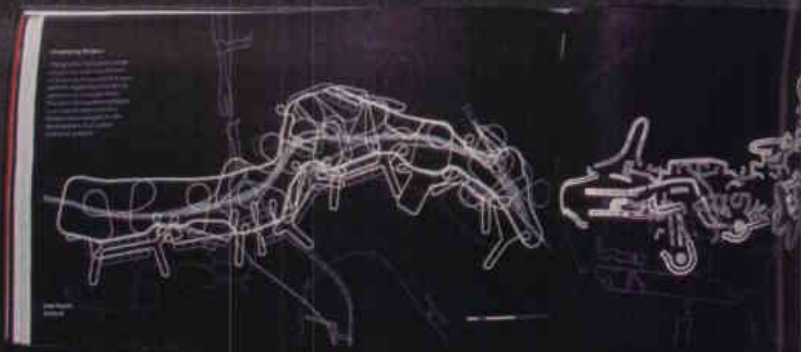


LANDSCAPE URBANISM

AA



Landspace landscapism.

Landscape Urbanism: A Manual for the Machinic Landscape, edited by Mohsen Mostafaei & Ciro Najle, Architectural Association, London, 2003.

CLEARLY, THE WORLD IS A DIFFERENT PLACE TO WHAT it was 42 years ago, and much of that difference can be characterised as disturbances to the local on the basis of globalism, particularly due to changes in communication and information technology. Like it did to modernism before it, this societal change calls for, or more aptly calls to, designers to reformulate their practices to reflect this significant new paradigm. This is a rationale that has driven much avant-garde activity in the 20th century, and in this case, 'landscape urbanism' in the 21st. In the case of this discussion, it is important to recognise the avant-garde cycle¹ at work in the development of the discipline, not only to contextualise its production, but so that its greatest values can be welcomed: despite the propaganda and arrogance, important revisions occurred to the canons after all the -isms. That said, I do find myself asking: do we need another -ism?

Landscape Urbanism is an Architectural Association (London) publication, displaying work from the first cohort of students from its postgraduate program of the same name², together with an excellent range of essays that either address this new discipline, or demonstrate projects and thinking that the authors see as informing the students' work. Whether or not landscape urbanism is going to gain some legitimacy in the world or not is questionable, however specific aspects of the myriad projects and practitioners that are being accumulated under its

mantle are potentially very significant for contemporary practice, both in the academy and in the real world. This article will use a review of the AA publication as an opportunity to introduce and critique the ideas being discussed in relation to this 'emergent' school of thought and body of work. It will finally propose that landscape urbanism is misguided and impotent in its attention to abstract data in the face of the real stylistic and picturesque forces at work in contemporary urban development.

In James Corner's contribution to the publication he discusses this emerging practice:

"Landscape urbanism brings together two previously unrelated terms to suggest a new hybrid discipline... Paradoxical and complex, landscape urbanism involves understanding the full mix of ingredients that comprise a rich urban ecology. As a complex amalgam, landscape urbanism is more than a singular image or style: it is an ethos, an attitude, a way of thinking and acting. In many ways it can be seen as a response to the failure of traditional urban design and planning to operate effectively in the contemporary city."

Most creative movements are formalised theoretically after the initial work has been done, and so, like deconstruction in the late eighties and early nineties, landscape urbanism puts a name to an aesthetic that we have seen emerging for the last six or seven years³. Landscape urbanism gathers together a range of work and ideas from the last 12 years under a

banner: the post-industrial world in the age of information; landscape mapping of post-industrial landscapes; datascaping and diagramming; critiques of representation; ecology, complexity and emergence in science; discussions from Deleuze and Guattari about the rhizome; together with critiques of masterplanning. Add to this the recent architectural publishing on topographic landscape buildings⁴ and there can be no question that architecture is going horizontal.

It is also important to acknowledge the pivotal significance of Koolhaas in a range of ways: His call to action in "Bigness", in terms of establishing a scale and ambitiousness for the urban problem, pushes young architects out of the trenches, while his characterisation of the world as all '-scape' re-establishes it as a tabula rasa rich for colonisation, Koolhaas' project for Melun-Senart, which tied the future development of the city to an infrastructure of deprogrammed voids, introduced the concept that a masterplan could establish conditions for time. Of perhaps even greater significance is the change to architectural publishing made by his book *S.M.X.L.*, which elevated unbuilt process work to the subject of architecture itself, and in its design and use of graphs and matrices pushed 'the diagram' to the fore as a way of both designing and understanding the world, and making it available to architecture. The increased affordability of the printing press has also fostered the development of landscape urbanism, as it has allowed



the unbuilt repeated iterative discussion, and thus some theoretical development. While Koolhaas is not a card-carrying landscape urbanist, his contemporary work cuts to many of the issues and techniques they discuss. The schemes for Downsview Park in Toronto⁵, by Field Operations and a scheme in Rotterdam by OMA⁶, both took an ecological view of developing the site over time with systems rather than strict static form. These schemes will have the importance in the next 10 years that Koolhaas' OMA scheme for Parc de la Villette had in the last.

This emphasis on the ground firmly shifts the gaze of propositional architecture to the map, in definite contradistinction to the plan, which would be seen as too loaded to produce innovation in the world. Indeed, with the map comes the world and, with a sigh, architecture gloriously retreats to megastructure by another name: a time when it could attend to broader cultural issues by simplifying them into manifestos and literal mass forms. While there was a distinct determinism with modernist planning that demonstrated a totalitarian will over the entire landscape, landscape urbanism rejects such a totalising approach in favour of provisional and contingent solutions, using inherent latent forces in sites. These forces are identified through their quantity in data, and are observed in financial, scientific and statistical terms. Ciro Najle, coordinator of the AA program, identifies five contexts for

working in this way, a practice that he characterises as "machinic", in his essay 'Convoluteness':

"The five contexts that the landscape provides are operatively integrated into the five aspects of the machinic: multi-scalarity, trans-specificity, pre-physicality, performativity and internal coexistence. These five aspects are integrated into a multiple system of causal relations working in circuits."

The discussion of such relationships has the forcefulness of scientific writing, which comes with firm belief in fact. Such a rhetoric is reminiscent of the discussions about emerging relationships in the arts and sciences by Gyorgy Kepes in the sixties⁷. In this late modernist period, the languages of science and technology were inherently converging⁸, in a manner we must now recognise as the status quo of our time: the ubiquitousness of the media and communication. Similarly, as it was for the rhetoric of modernism, landscape urbanism looks to complexity theory and emergence to provide it with rhetorical material. In complexity theory, things emerge from complex relationships, in roughly an evolutionary and ecological manner. This type of approach allows architecture to appear to engage the larger world by involving the information of its description. In the language of landscape urbanism, this allows architecture 'agency' – the power to affect things.

In engaging this scientific material, like the modernist practices it critiques, landscape urbanism

uses this information un-critically, by simply extruding it into form, falling into precisely the representational trap that its founding premises seem to preclude. Form becomes a snapshot of change, as Manuel de Landa notes. The process is reduced to an object, whether blobs, strings or bulges, the final products all remain as abstract forms sitting on a tableaux of landscape, presumably itself formed by the forces that landscape urbanism seeks to engage with, but ends up representing. Thirty years ago, Gerald Holton noted the difficulty of really engaging dynamic forces in design:

"...equations, the usual tool for describing motion in physics, accentuate continuity and are generally helpless in the face of discontinuity. Yet measurement, the process which gives meaning to the equations, is inherently a discontinuity-producing process... The representation of motion in its full allegorical sense is therefore as impossible in science as it is in painting or, for that matter, in a literary work."

There is a definite sense of desperation for the new in this landscape urbanism. Like deconstruction before it, landscape urbanism rejects typological solutions, seeking rather a 'new' geometry of the time, and in doing so, they fall into exactly the same traps that they critique modernist planning for: the deterministic imposition of form onto sites. This remains true even if the information was generated from specific sites, as its final distillation in form ends up abstracting that information. While the data set might deal with

cultural factors such as money flow, it ignores as typological, for example, that what that money is actually spent on, is stylised cultural production. People buy things, they do not just buy. To suggest that the form of that transaction is separate from the actual product is ludicrous, and typology provides a stronger methodology in the 'real world', where specialisation is now happening within types, such as convergence in phones, or whatever.

In the AA publication, a range of practitioners, who are presumably exemplary of the kind of practice that landscape urbanism is about, themselves caution against simply appropriating information without engaging its actual content. Keller Easterling clearly locates the Pyrrhic victory of landscape urbanism, in her essay entitled 'Error' in the same volume:

"When architecture makes its own world of data territories, it excludes the wide world that really is made of data territories and networks, a world where space is poised to play a pivotal role in global politics, and where the invention of spatial components can leverage organisations of labour, natural resources and patterns of consumption."

This approach of operating with what is at hand, characterised by anthropologist Levi-Strauss as the 'bricoleur', was investigated locally in Shane Murray's Master of Urban Design course in the early nineties. These forces engage taste by positioning the public individual in 'aspirational' terms and are thus more concerned with marketing and advertising than statistics. These practitioners utilise the same technology as the landscape urbanists, but to do the job, not just to generate it. In their 'Horizontal Digressions' studio, Ian McDougall and Howard Raggatt investigated just such an urbanism, with McDougall suggesting that the agency in development is firmly located in the superficial, the visible:

"This is unfinished business. The potential to explore the colonial city and its mentality now, to build on the

sentimental conventions of its history; half denied, half erased at each redevelopment, situation. The pervasiveness of mass media, cinema and new technology, lends new opportunities to explore the problems of vision, of the view and the perception of the city; the problems of the Picturesque seem to be just like now."

Conversely, this landscape urbanism studio work and its forms of difficult geometry, are clearly

The analytical methodologies and representational tools offered by landscape urbanism are fascinating and relevant, and the societal conditions they are predicated on are relevant, however their extrusion into form which is then renamed 'organisation' is simplistic. While deconstruction recognised that the material it was appropriating was for design generation, as an alternative source of form, landscape urbanists believe they are gaining power in the real space of the world, as opposed to describing its forces.

disengaged from the real world – a world from which ironically, they are apparently generated.

What it demonstrates is the same naïve graphic control of the land that the book starts by critiquing. Its vision is clearly modern in constitution.

The analytical methodologies and representational tools offered by landscape urbanism are fascinating and relevant, and the societal conditions they are predicated on are relevant, however their extrusion into form which is then renamed 'organisation' is simplistic. While deconstruction recognised that the material it was appropriating was for design generation, as an alternative source of form, landscape urbanists believe they are gaining power in the real space of the world, as opposed to describing its forces. A discussion of these forces may well be a way into them, but the vanity of pursuing such a simple and impotent formal agenda is disappointing. There is too much to really be done. By simply reverting to the abstraction of economic and statistical forces, landscape urbanism loses the agency it might have if it actually engaged in real terms with them, even if that

meant that the architecture was typological and even somewhat stylised.

In a world after Venturi that is increasingly subjective rather than objective, as landscape urbanism would hope, the methods utilised by American super-mall designer John Jerde may be more relevant and effective. These methods are not radical or new, but are finely honed in the capitalism of real estate speculation and consumer choice. The difference is the potential that they have in the hands of a designer, in a world of bigger architectural projects. Examining Koolhaas' 'Content', one can see a stronger interest in the material and image substance of information than simply its abstract diagrammatic 'flow', and his Prada project moves the architectural vision into the product. Clearly, Koolhaas is a powerful force in this kind of thinking and his 'patents' for certain methods are now the stock and trade for landscape urbanists, thus defining them as machines, devoid of content.

Finally, as a landscaper, one would have to observe that *Backyard Blitz* will be a much more important force in the urban environment than landscape urbanism will ever be.

1. Puggsli, R. *The Theory of the Team Game*, Harvard University Press, 1968.
2. Locally, *AAU* landscape architecture has re-named its Masters by Project program to *Emergence*, run by her Anne Ware + Rosalind Manóvillos, herself a graduate of the AA, with extracts of her project included in the AA publication.
3. Arguably prophetic at the 1984 *Colloquio in Barcellona* in 1986, particularly in the positioning writing of Ignasi de Solà Morales, with his identification of themes such as 'Flow' and the framing of theoretical ideas around topography.
4. *Earth Buildings by Architects and Landscapers* by Anne Bejoly.
5. Czerniak, J. Case Downtown Park Toronto, *Postel* 133, 2002.
6. *OMA* collaboration with *Four Men, Peter Blaise* and *Yvo Brumer* in the development of *Museum park*, adjacent to their *Kunsthal* in Rotterdam.
7. In his *Vision – Value* series in the series, notably *Structure in Art and Science*, Kepes, G. *Essentials*, 1969 and *The Nature and Art of Motion*, *Kepes G.*, *Rail*, Blackwell, 1964.
8. The gap between scientific and cultural and social systems has been discussed in particular by work from the Santa Fe Institute and more recently *Manuel de Landa*, *One Thousand Years of Non-Linear History*, *Zona Books*, 2000.
9. Book review, David Neuman, *AAOZ*.