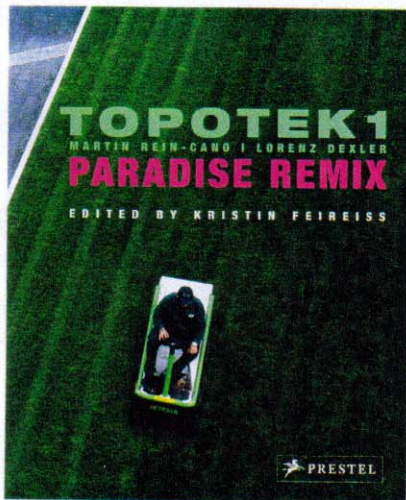


Topotek 1: Paradise Remix
edited by Kristin Feireiss

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It's been ten years since Rem Koolhaas, OMA, and Bruce Mau released *S,M,L,XL*, inspiring a plethora of similar tomes by young architects with less work. These huge volumes saturated the reader with images in order to create a "sensibility," a sense of the designer's interests drawn from disparate projects. Ten years later, European landscape architecture is producing similar types of books. Designers such as Petra Blaisse and Gunther Vögt are in on the trend, and then there is this volume about the work of Berlin landscape architects Topotek 1.

In contrast to much of the contemporary landscape architecture in Europe, which is characterized by elegance and restraint as part of a default style, the work of Argentinian-born Berliner Martin Rein-Cano and his German partner Lorenz Dexler is over the top. Their aesthetic is more baroque than minimal. When I recently taught with Rein-Cano at the ENSP Versailles, I had the opportunity to discuss his version of landscape architecture, which is at odds with much of what is happening in Germany. Where his German counterparts are interested in community, nature, and planning, he is interested in exclusivity, gardens, and detail. Where landscape academics are interested in Vaux-le-Vicomte as the most tasteful and precise of Le Notre's gardens, Rein-Cano walked through Versailles every day we taught, marveling at a

moment when landscape architecture was the most powerful and fashionable of the vehicles of the court of Louis XIV. "We were never about the public, never about the masses," he notes of landscape architecture during the baroque period, "we were a boutique indulgence and we need, as a profession, to drop this self-deprecating humbleness and regain some of that status and privilege ... and those type of fees."

The baroque, and the history of gardens generally, is an enduring interest for Topotek 1. Educated at UCLA Berkeley, Rein-Cano worked for Martha Schwartz during her brief but productive collaborative professional partnership with Peter Walker. Alongside conversations with British architect Will Alsop and German artist Rosemarie Trockel, one with Schwartz is also included in the book, and it obliquely discusses the work of Topotek 1 while more generally expanding on issues that concern the practice of contemporary landscape architecture. On one hand, this approach gives the volume a breadth that makes it less solipsistic. On the other, it makes it somewhat unspecific in its scope, even as it builds sensibility, or "sensibilisation" as Rein-Cano calls it, suggesting a process of creating an ambience. Certainly it gives a sense of the firm's broad intellectual engagement in design, and of the humanistic character of its practice.

From his period of working with Schwartz, a period sometimes described as "postmodern," Rein-Cano retains a number of interests. He remains fascinated by popular culture and kitsch, as evidenced by the practice's extraordinarily exuberant project for the 2004 Wolfsburg Garden Show, for which the designers produced, amongst other things, a temporary, inflatable playground. This project employed the language of the bouncing castle, but created forms that were ambiguous in their use, distributing them as sculptures rather than centralizing them in a bouncing castle form. Made of pink PVC, the sculptures had a vague and disturbing sexuality to them, in a Mapplethorpe kind of way. They were executed with great precision, situated on the boundary between camp and the vulgar, and could have easily been excessive in less skilful hands. In terms of the current design discourse, they were designed rather than generated. To my mind, this self-conscious interest in design runs pleasingly counter to the trajectories of much supposedly innovative landscape work at the moment, which seeks to search out novelty for its own sake, hiding a lack of design ability behind generative data.

In another project, for a courtyard on Unter den Linden in Berlin that I had the opportunity to

visit, one can see other interests that Rein-Cano shares with Schwartz. These are reflected in the title of the practice's book *Paradise Remix* – an interest in appropriation or sampling, as well as in the power of surface. This project is simply the creation of a gilded pattern on black concrete, for a space that is a glorified light-well, only ever viewed from above or to the side, and rarely moved through. The intricate acanthus pattern recalls the *broderies* of the baroque *parterre* gardens that Rein-Cano is such a fan of. In a move that reminds me of the textile and garden designer Petra Blaisse, Rein-Cano confesses that the pattern was stolen from his mother's lounge room carpet, a leftover from the 1970s, in Buenos Aires. The project is solely a surface treatment, but it is very precise. Great care has been given to the scaling of the motif and its orientation in the space, with an eye to how it will be viewed. This demonstrates the thought that the practice puts into simple decisions. It's something I see reiterated when I visit their office and notice numerous 1:1 printouts of steel section options for a project, showing that nothing in a Topotek 1 project is left to chance.

Rein-Cano has also worked for the important German landscape architect Gabrielle Kiefer. While Büro Kiefer is now pursuing what Rein-Cano characterizes as a general fascination in German landscape with rustic projects that insert designed forms into a landscape then left to regenerate naturally on its own, Topotek 1 continues to be preoccupied with the artifice of the garden. Over a glass of wine in Versailles, listening to Martin rail against the preoccupations of landscape architecture – its tendency to assume a subservient position; its fascination with social issues; its blind pursuit of nature over culture – the future of the discipline seems rich, luxuriant, and exciting, a foreground instead of a background.

Review by Julian Raxworthy

photographer
Hanns Joosten

opposite page, top
Topotek 1's ambiguous PVC sculptures
at the 2004 Wolfsburg Garden Show.

opposite page, bottom
The oversized *broderie* pattern of this
Unter den Linden courtyard shows the
practice's interest in the baroque.

