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RECOVERING LANDSCAPE

Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture



Edited by James Corner

Princeton Architectural Press

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Chapter 2



The Reclaiming of Sites

Sébastien Marot

The collection of essays in this book calls attention to a remarkable phenomenon that is gaining momentum today: the significance of landscape architecture's contribution to the discussions, the thinking, and the operations that affect the management and transformation of sites and regions. Landscape architecture is not, of course, a new profession. It is practiced in nearly all parts of the world and holds a prominent position in the industrialized countries. In some of these, most notably those of Western Europe, the field can boast of long-cherished ideas and deep-rooted traditions.

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Despite differences in culture from one country and time to another, the profession of landscape architecture is more or less universally identifiable with the creative design of outdoor and public spaces. Its history embraces not only garden art and park design but also issues of agriculture, cartography, civil and military engineering, and town planning. This history highlights certain vintage periods during which—in especially propitious political or technical circumstances—landscape architects seized the initiative, adapted to changing conditions, and constructed new forms of space. The accomplishments of these events vary significantly from place to place, lending a rich density to the corpus of references that constitute the field of landscape architecture.

In what follows, I endeavor to clarify on a more modest scale the circumstances that account for the revival of landscape architectural ideas in our own time. I address less the quality or aesthetic trends of contemporary design and more the disciplinary traditions that underlie any significant recovery and reinvention of the landscape project. My focus is limited to developments in France, but many of the points raised share characteristics with other places.¹

The Situation in France Today

Since the early 1980s, a combination of circumstances has made France one of the European nations most actively engaged in the recovery of landscape studies within the larger architectural disciplines. At first glance, this situation may

Fig 1. *Parc du Sausset*, Villepinte. Claire and Michel Corajoud, landscape architects, 1982–1998. Photograph by Gérard Dufresne.

seem surprising, particularly when viewed in light of the relative indifference that has been shown in France for landscape generally—not to mention garden art—during the preceding five or six decades. If questioned about the period between the 1920s and the 1980s, it is unlikely that more than a handful of today's architecture students or designers would be able to name a single landscape designer or to cite a single important built work. The most widely read might recall the gardens of Villa Noailles, and the most inquisitive might refer to Albert Kahn's microcosm, but the majority would have little to say. Yet this period was full of creativity, producing a range of places that we visit but fail to recognize.²

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Rather than indifference, it might be better to characterize this condition as one of oblivion, almost as if a long parenthesis in history had been blocked out. The result has been forgetfulness of the power of design in making new landscapes. People have generally lost the habit not of appreciating landscapes but of looking at gardens, public spaces, parks, and larger open areas as sites for active design. In the final analysis, it is as if the spaces around buildings and every other type of construction are viewed as little more than empty, leftover areas, void and forgotten. Such spaces may be considered necessary components of any city, but they are easily relegated to the functional status of generic green spaces.

This dismissal of gardens and landscaping took place during a period in which the ideals of the modern movement surged to predominance and then declined. This fact may seem odd, given that landscape specialists trained in the school of Alphand had been widely represented in France during the period immediately before this and enjoyed much success in relating landscape methods and models to the city—as in garden cities, urban parks, and greenbelts, for instance.³ Still, the landscape idea waned in France beginning in the 1920s.

Several factors related to economic and political trends offer a basic explanation for this prolonged era of decline and neglect; I cite just two of the more significant ones. First, government interests, spurred by postwar reconstruction throughout the so-called Glorious Thirty Years and lasting until the first oil crisis in the early 1970s, followed a policy of urban and regional planning that was based almost exclusively on the development of mass housing projects and infrastructural systems. The emphasis here was not on site or environment but on engineering, quantitative planning, and standardization. A second factor was a serious crisis of economy and culture in the rural world, with a corresponding breakdown of traditional landscape structures. This crisis occurred rela-

tively later in France than in other European countries—first because a large proportion of the country is rural with many people owning and working the land, and second because the government prioritized cities and infrastructure at the expense of neglecting the rural world. This situation meant that the effects of globalization and new technology have been more brutally registered in the French countryside as change has had to occur quickly and with little time to adapt to new lifestyles.

The combined effects of these two factors—a national policy conducted with excessive determination to create new residences and infrastructures, together with a conscious neglect of the economic and cultural changes impinging upon the rural world—accounts, in large part, for the one-sided success that the mostly bureaucratic, modernist practices of regional management have enjoyed for almost fifty years.⁴ This top-down style of planning and management, operating from the inside outward (or, as Le Corbusier described, “*du dedans vers le dehors*” or “from the inside to the outside”), has rarely taken into account local differences and history. The program, defined a priori, was given absolute priority over the consideration of the site. In representing localities and places solely in quantitative terms, the innate richness and history of sites were reduced into diagrammatic map-forms in which the image of the city was viewed and arranged as functional zones. Sites were seen as blank surfaces on which to organize urban functions in efficient and often standardized ways.

Reclaiming the Site

By now, the scenario painted above is an all-too-familiar history. We now recognize how public projects and their administrative authorities came to be organized into specialized bureaucracies solely on the basis of a clear distinction between the elements and functions of the urban and regional sectors. Moreover, we recognize how this situation is made all the more difficult as new economies of tourism, communications, recreation, and distribution and the rise of individual suburban homes extend their reach into the countryside, blurring traditional distinctions between town and country.

The later years of this scenario, however—the period of the *villes nouvelles*—were also the first years of a resurgence of interest and value in landscape. This recovery of landscape began with the attempts of specialists to create that “filter of vegetation” envisaged in the sketches of Le Corbusier for the *cité contemporaine* and the *ville radieuse*, but never realized. Landscape was here promoted as a sort of palliative to modern urbanization. However, repressed by

a development process that saw landscaping as an optional ingredient, the discipline of landscape design became more and more focused on the primary victim in this situation: the site itself. Landscape architects began to look more deeply and more creatively at the unique specificity of sites, especially at the borders and edges, the areas in between that were neglected by architects and planners. In so doing, landscape architects soon learned to take instant advantage of any opportunity to repair the damage done and to restore something of memory and a sense of place to these otherwise razed sites.

In a paradoxical way, then, the struggles that took place over the urbanization of peripheral areas and the *villes nouvelles* provided on-site training for a new generation of landscape architects. On the basis of that experience, they immersed themselves in teaching to further research and explore the possibilities of this newly recovered interest. Many others have since taken their place alongside Michel Corajoud at the new *École Nationale Supérieure du Paysage* in Versailles, which has been transformed in recent years into a think tank and laboratory of alternative approaches to landscape design. The vision being elaborated in Versailles today is not limited to merely changing priorities from building to landscape but instead takes as its starting point the “reading and writing” of the site itself. Such a view is less focused on the program of a proposed building project than on exploring the possibilities of site characteristics and hidden phenomena. As such, it outlines a critical and reflective approach to making new landscapes.

During the last years of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, the development of these new approaches to landscape architecture coincided with an important evolution in the political-economic realities outlined earlier. Although government policies concerning regional infrastructures lost little of their authority, the move toward decentralization led to a proliferation of new public commissions. Provinces, regions, and townships won back an impressive amount of influence in the fields of urban studies and land management and became promoters of design approaches that took into account an evaluation of sites and their local history. There was thus a sense in which landscape could be taken as a value in and of itself, presented as emblematic of what makes a given area special and unique.

Consequently, these new local markets, encouraged by national policies directing them to pay more attention to the environment, have begun to solicit alternative design approaches in which greater importance is given to interpreting the unique attributes of a site than to a priori building programs. Riding the

wave of this general movement toward awareness of public space as landscape, landscape architects have begun to assume leadership roles in the design of public space. In the best examples, the work resembles stage design in that the landscape architect stages the conditions necessary for ensuring the participation and engagement of people in the new public spaces.

Since the mid-1980s, France has finally become aware of the true gravity of the crisis in the rural world and the agricultural economy. In an effort to prop up this economy, containment measures were taken that have since proven wholly unable to reverse the decline and abandonment of small land holdings and larger tracts of land. Moreover, the growth of other economies, such as tourism and recreation, has moved into these agrarian areas without evolving their own culture of place-making and settlement. Increasing awareness of this situation has led to the consensus that overall plans are necessary to help shape and direct the future of these areas. The preservation of the legacy of these agrarian communities, the care of their resources, and the adaptation to new, changing economies demands true invention in the form of innovative landscape projects. These issues are leading to an enormous amount of study at both national and local levels, the force of which reflects the emergence of an awareness of landscape as public space, with the consequence that landscape architects are increasingly assigned the important role of consultant or master planner.

This new context, based on the recognition of a dialectical relationship between the respective notions of landscape and public space, explains not only the rebirth of landscape studies in France but also the critical importance of the recovery. Placed by their culture at the crossroad of two heritages—that of the agrarian peasantry on the one hand and the artistry and high culture of the urban planning on the other—today's most interesting landscape architects take a radical approach to inverting the distinctions of their predecessors. The specific qualities of sites and their situations provide both the rationale and the raw material for making new projects. The form and character a subsequent design derives from the physical fabric as well as the inherited attributes (past conditions) of the site and its larger territory.

The key principle of this process involves careful survey, identification, criticism, and inventive analysis. The close coordination and complex representation of site and planning is worth emphasizing. It harks back to the origin and tradition of a discipline that has always been intimately linked to developments in surveying, painting, theater, and scenography. Just as the layout of the large classical gardens can be related to the progress and ambitions of cartography, so

areas, “non-places”), they have developed to a fine art the activities of insertion, transition, and transplantation. These activities allow landscape architects to focus more on the relationships among objects than on the objects themselves. Thus, the quality of landscape and public space depends not so much on the perfection of its buildings or its services but rather on the quality of the relationships among them. Such relationships are constituted by transitions, sequences, visual connections, the “calculated capture of surroundings.”⁷ The complex combination of these articulations creates the overall sense of the site.

This kind of relational thinking may well be the best summary and expression of the teachings of landscape architecture as they apply to the management of cities and outlying areas today. This is a view that not only accords special attention to transitional and liminal spaces but also calls for the reading and designing of all landscape spaces as relative spaces. The criticism implied in this formulation is less targeted at the reifying trends of some architects than at the conditions of production in the public sphere. That landscape as a larger milieu is rarely subject to the control of a single authority means that the forms of relational structuring cannot be so much formal as they are vehicles for negotiation and mediation (among neighboring constituencies, management authorities, and so on). Here, relational thinking extends to the coordination of the various players and departments involved in public space maintenance (the streets, parks, utilities, and engineering departments, for instance). Thus, by its very nature, the relational thinking that is inherent to landscape architecture takes a dim view of the subdivision of land and the dispersal of authority and responsibilities, as these are the primary agents that have caused the disintegration of the landscape as a coherent fabric.

This situation has led some landscape architects to reconsider their role, prompting them to provide responses to client requests that consider aspects not usually considered germane and to call attention to issues far beyond their commission—in general, to transcend the limits usually assigned to such consultation in an effort to bring attention to broader objectives. These are landscaping strategies, if you will, evasive ploys that challenge the limits of bureaucratic authority while extending the scope of what is possible.

To encourage people to view public spaces as landscapes means getting them to reconsider their own habits and functions and, ultimately, to overcome the divisive thinking on which those functions are based. It means persuading clients to allow other aims to have weight, aims that can be shared among many people on the basis of reworking the way in which territory is directed and man-

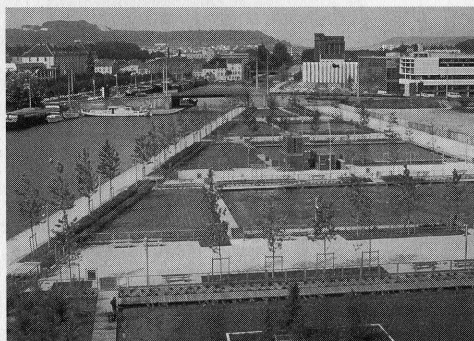
aged. The aim is to clear the way for new ambitions that can be shared by all the players involved in transforming and managing landscapes. This strategic and synthetic approach is what enables contemporary landscape architects to assume leadership roles in the design and coordination of large-scale projects. The contemporary designs and studies of the French landscape architect Alexandre Chemetoff are of particular relevance in this respect, as they are an example of a stance that dares to approach the provocative (Fig. 2).

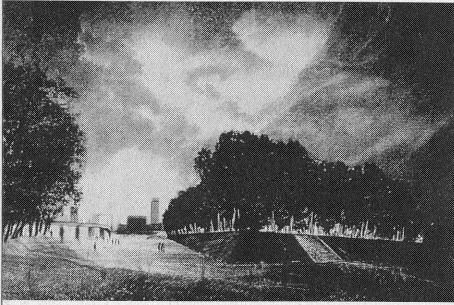
The Suburban Frontier

Yet another aspect of the involvement of landscape designers in the French cultural debate merits mention, as it reveals a fascinating aspect of the aforementioned developments. This is the adroitness that many landscape designers have demonstrated in examining and reevaluating the history of their own discipline on the basis of the changes that they themselves have wrought. As we have seen, by a curious twist of fate, the contemporary context puts landscape designers at the convergence of the agricultural and urban traditions, which is to say they are at the center of an awareness that is directed, on the one hand, to consider public spaces (urban projects) as landscapes and and, on the other, to see landscapes (rural expanses) as public spaces and therefore as possible objectives of projects.

There is, however, a third condition today, one that is increasingly prevalent and that blurs the traditional distinctions between town and country. This is suburbia, that third world, which is so vast and experiencing such profound changes that one forgets it possesses its own history, a history that leads back neither to the city nor the countryside. And yet, when one seeks the design tradition behind the art of gardens and landscaping, generally one is forced to turn to the study of suburban design. Almost all of the historical reference points in landscape architecture are derived from the suburban tradition, and it is these points that have, in large part, contributed to the invention and formation of such places as the gardens of suburban Paris: parks and picturesque areas, promenades outside city walls, city gardens, parkways, greenbelts, and park systems.

Fig 2. *Jardins d'Eau*, Nancy, Alexandre Chemetoff, landscape architect, 1991–1996. Photograph by A. Duboys Fresney.





All of these are outgrowths of efforts made to join the urban structure more smoothly to that of the countryside and to tighten the connection between the city and the larger region as necessitated by suburban expansion. Versailles, with its extensive radial geometry, is an outstanding example of the strategy to place both city and countryside into perspective, effectively mediating between *pars urbana* and *pars rustica*. The French *campagnes environnantes* provided the context for this mediation. Of course, it is well known how the model of Versailles presaged L'Enfant's plan for Washington, D.C., and Le Blond's plan for St. Petersburg.

Historically, gardens and landscapes have often provided the models for later urban creations. Each style and attitude has given rise to specific interpretations vis-à-vis town planning. Just as cities such as Washington and St. Petersburg—but also numerous urban *embellissements* and extension plans of the eighteenth century—drew from the radial and axial geometry of seventeenth-century French gardens, many nineteenth-century curvilinear residential suburbs derived their character from the eighteenth-century English landscape tradition. Thus, it is possible to

show how landscape architecture—which, in the light of these examples, could easily be characterized as a kind of suburban design—was historically the developmental laboratory for new models for urban planning, well before urban planning decided—and not necessarily for the better—to turn itself into an autonomous discipline by abandoning the experimental laboratory of the garden.⁸

The most interesting aspect of the landscape experiments performed today in outlying areas is precisely this reintroduction of the long-neglected discipline of suburban studies derived from garden art. Here, certain landscape architects,

Fig 3 (top). *Le Socle de Bouleaux / Birch Trees Terrace*, project for the continuation of the grand axis of La Défense, Paris. Gilles Clement and Geoffroy Decheaume, 1992.

Fig 4 (bottom). *Serial Garden*, Parc André Citroën, Paris. Gilles Clement, landscape architect, 1992. Photograph by Douglas Dard.

linked by their tradition and professional culture to the middle suburban zone—the birthplace of their discipline—are among very few people today capable of revealing the rich complexity of sites and situations where other specialists see only chaos. To quote Michel Desvigne and Christine Dalnoky:

[These suburban areas] are not merely further expressions of “urban sprawl,” but have their own history, which, while recent, is none the less rich and also diversified and fascinating. Urban sprawl is in no sense inevitable and, since there is no nostalgia here, since there is no earlier state to which we can make reference, we dream of cities rooted to their landscape, cities where one can feel the slope of a hill, sense the freshness of valleys, follow the flow of water and the cycle of the seasons, cities in which distances can be measured, in which night truly falls, in which time is inscribed on the earth, on the skin of the landscape. To get back its dignity, landscape architecture must learn to fight back, to hide out in the hills and struggle.⁹



Conclusion

The recovery that landscape is today enjoying in France derives in large measure from a critical reactivation of *suburbanism*. Here, “sub” points not only to the land outside the city but also to the earth beneath it, as in the ground on which the city is founded or the site that preexists and transcends the program. Landscape architecture traditionally is positioned at the interface of town and country as well as of site and program. Thus, landscape approaches differ from those of architecture and planning in that they seek to *reclaim* rather than to conquer. In this sense, *suburbanism* is a neologism (as was the term *urbanism* a hundred years ago), and so, in ending, I propose the following lexicographic contribution to the great dictionary of landscape for the twenty-first century:

Suburbanism: from *suburbia* and *urbanism*. (1) The body of management experiments and structures in landscape architecture, town planning, civil engineering, and architecture that were developed for suburbia and through which

Fig 5. *Parc du Sausset*, Villepinte. Claire and Michel Corajoud, landscape architects, 1982–1998. Photograph by Gérard Dufresne.

suburban areas have shaped their own spaces and scenographies. (2) The discipline of design practice, first inspired by suburban situations (as contexts), where the hierarchy traditionally promoted in urbanism between program and site is reversed. Instead, the site itself becomes the matter and horizon of design. (3) The hypothesis (both theoretical and critical) that views the planning process as a movement from the outside (exterior) to the inside (interior), from the surrounding milieu to the city. This historiographic approach sees previous suburban experiments, including the landscape structures and particularly their gardens, as the true laboratories for urban design and regional planning. This perspective is not necessarily exclusive of its more traditionally accepted alternative.

In digging below the surface, in seaming, grafting, and reclaiming hidden and latent phenomena of places, landscape architects in France are today beginning to develop increasingly discriminating modes of interpreting and constructing sites and local situations. This is the promise of a profession concerned for the development and enrichment of built communities, and it is a promise that ought to provide a source of optimism for dealing with some of the most difficult, derelict, and seemingly inchoate sites that surround all cities today everywhere. To properly reclaim and improve these sites, the first and, perhaps, only thing we need to learn is how to look at them from a different point of view.

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Notes

- 1 I developed similar arguments to those presented in this essay in "L'alternative du paysage," *Le Visiteur* (October 1995): 54–81, English version originally published in *Het Landschap / The Landscape*, ed. K. Vandermarliere (Antwerp: Centre deSingel, 1995), 9–36, and also in "The Return of Landscape," in *Desvignes / Dalnoky* (Milan: Federico Motta Editore SpA, 1996; English edition, New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1997), 6–9.
- 2 Besides the creations, often private, of architects and landscape architects related to the modern movement (see Dorothée Imbert, *The Modernist Garden in France* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993]), I allude to some public places, parks and gardens created by landscape architects such as Jean-Claude-Nicolas Forestier and Edouard Redont (see Cardine Stefulesco, *L'Urbanisme Végétal* [Paris: I.D.F., 1993]) and also to the major landscape studies and plans related to the creation of new infrastructures, such as in the works of Henri Prost for the "Plan d'aménagement de la Côte d'Azur Varoise" (in the 1920s, but unrealized) or for the "L'aménagement de la région parisienne" (in the 1930s). After World War II, the decline and marginalization of these activities became more pronounced.
- 3 These skills and influences were even exported to other countries. The work of Jean-Claude-Nicolas Forestier in Buenos Aires and la Habana are examples of the success of French landscape architects abroad. No doubt this success owed much to the climate of colonialism at the time, but also to the international prestige of Alphant's school.
- 4 In using the term *modernist* here I am not referring to the architects of the modern movement (few of whom were actually given the opportunity to fully realize their

ideas at an urban level) but rather to the coarser and more technocratic modern *doxa* on urbanism that prevailed during this time and that affirmed the primacy of new programs at the expense of paying the most elementary respect to *places*.

- 5 On the term *palimpsest*, see André Corboz, "Le territoire comme palimpseste," in *Diogene* 121 (Jan.–Mar. 1987), 14–35. See also Eugenio Turri, "Il Teatro delle Memorie," in *Il Paesaggio come Teatro: dal territorio vissuto al territorio rappresentato* (Venezia: Massilio, 1998).
- 6 See Michel Corajoud, "Le paysage comme synthèse," in *Composer le paysage*, ed. Catherine Bersani (Seysssel, France: Champ Vallon, 1989).
- 7 This expression is used by Michel Vernes concerning the public gardens designed by Alphand in Paris in "Du Jardin de Ville à la Ville Jardin," *Pages-Paysages* 2 (1994): 24.
- 8 See Gaston Bardet, *Paris: naissance et méconnaissance de l'urbanisme* (Paris: S.A.B.R.I., 1951); Lewis Mumford, "From the Suburbs to the City of Tomorrow," in *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961); and Peter Rowe, *Making a Middle Landscape* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).
- 9 Michel Desvignes and Christine Dalnoky, "Parcours dans le Paysage des Hauts-de-Seine," *Topos* 13 (May 1994): 36.