



Envisioning Hyperlandscapes

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SÉBASTIEN MAROT

ENVISIONING HYPERLANDSCAPES

In this piece, Marot searches for a new operative metaphor for landscape architects that will allow them to be effective ‘site seers’, those who can decipher the complex layers of time, program, and meaning in the contemporary ‘hyperlandscape’.
(Abstract text not final)

Site-Seeing

¹ When artist Robert Smithson coined the word “site-seeing” to describe his suburban rambles and the work he did about the derelict areas that were the subjects of his “non-sites,” he captured a fundamental aspect of what design is about.² Nowadays, every architect, urbanist or landscape designer is first and foremost (or should be) a site-seer or a visitor: a careful observer and student of the sites he is called upon to modify, transform or activate. By considering the artist as site-seer, Smithson both compared and contrasted him with the usual sight-seer: the tourist, and the classical landscape painter. His message was basically that a site is not a sight: It cannot be grasped in just one or several sights, and though it may be experienced and re-presented, it is ultimately, as a space-time matrix, invisible. This is why Smithson’s non-sites were not two-dimensional *mimetic* pictures (such as, for instance, a picturesque landscape painting) but “three-dimensional *logical* pictures” of those sites. In this respect, it could

be wondered, as I have suggested elsewhere, whether a landscape design could be envisioned, to some extent, as an *on-site non-site*: a three-dimensional logical picture of a site, implemented on the site itself.³

Given the disrepute that tourists have fallen into (as consumers and pleasure seekers of a world gone globally unsustainable), some will certainly find it improper to characterize designers, and particularly landscape architects, as a special breed of tourists. But this is not meant to be a paradox. J. B. Jackson, indisputably the father of “landscape studies” in 20th century America, insisted himself that the true ambition of his time as an educator was to teach his students how to be “alert and enthusiastic tourists,”⁴ able to go beyond the three-star landmarks of the Baedeker so as to penetrate, decipher, and appreciate the complex structures and syntaxes that construe a given landscape, area or site. In order to go one step further, and operate as site-seers who envision the invisible, designers must be equipped with appropriate lenses and metaphors.

Landscapes

Jackson was very aware of the ambivalence of the word “landscape.” One of his most famous collections of essays, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, is particularly revealing in this respect, since it starts with a singular, looking for a definition of what landscape truly is or means (“The Word Itself”) and finishes with a plural (“Concluding with Landscapes”).⁵ In this final piece, Jackson explains that his lifelong experiences as a visitor led him to distinguish three kinds of landscapes. Landscape One, he calls either the medieval or the vernacular. In his view, it has (or had) two characteristics. First, it was very local, made largely with the materials and resources that were ready at hand, and centered on the community that managed it. It was a mosaic, a patchwork of such locally managed areas, and Jackson compares these medieval landscapes to the vernacular languages (the different patois that were spoken very locally in these areas). Second, it was an ever-changing landscape (three-field system, rotating fallow lands, etc.). Nothing (constructions, limits, etc.) was really fixed and established once and for all. Then comes Landscape Two which Jackson calls the classical, the political or the aristocratic—again this hesitation between chronological and typological classifications. From what he writes, we understand that Landscape Two is the one that progressively took over in Europe, from the Renaissance up to the 18th century. But the Roman *centurio* (as well as the grid of Jefferson) is also typical of the second landscape type. For Jackson, Landscape Two is the opposite of Landscape One: it is not specifically local but reigns, like a vehicular language or a *lingua franca* rather than a vernacular language, on much larger territorial scales. While the medieval was ever changing, the classical is, on the contrary, a landscape of fixed limits, axes and conventions, a landscape of stable constituents. This classical landscape of property, permanence and power “sets great score on visibility:” it is “landscape as a work of art, as kind of a supergarden.”⁶ The great classical gardens were the laboratories, the foyers and the masterpieces of this canonical landscape. And finally comes Landscape Three, which started to appear during the industrial

revolution but really took over after the Second World War, proliferating along the strips and transportation networks of America. Although Jackson offers no name for it, it does not mean that it is unspeakable. As the title of the book makes clear, Jackson saw Landscape Three as a new kind of vernacular, and it is indeed to that ever-changing landscape of drive-ins, parking lots, trailer courts, motels, shopping centers with tropical gardens, resorts, commercial signs, amusement parks, wildlife shelters, and provisional buildings that he devoted a large part of his studies and writings.

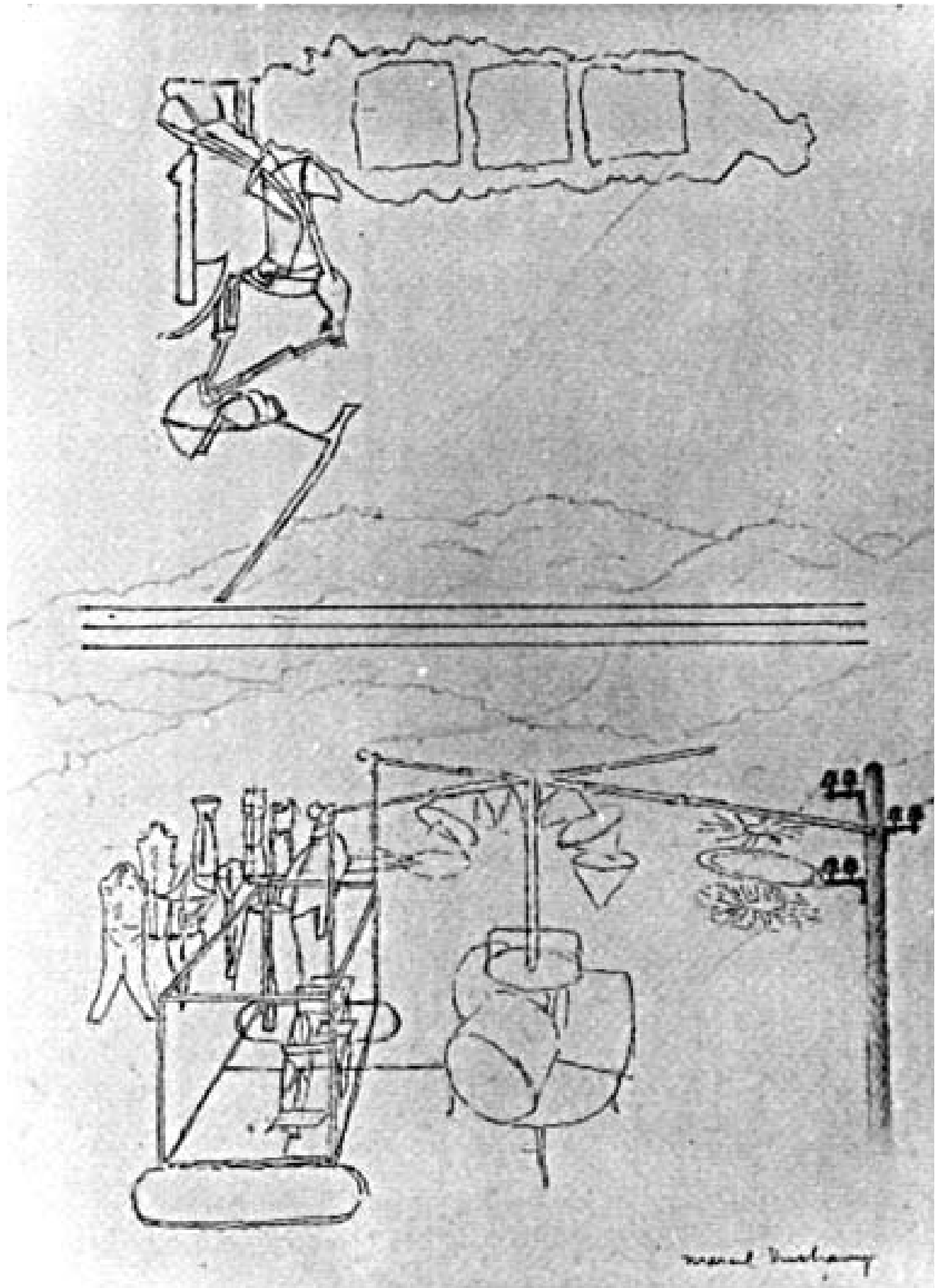
Hyperlandscape

What impresses me most in this text is not so much the distinction of these three landscapes in itself as Jackson’s hesitation in naming them. Chronology? Or typology? Should we consider them as periods in the history of landscape, or as different species of landscapes? In my view, they are both: not only successive but somehow contemporary in the world we live in, not only juxtaposed but very often overlapping, superimposed onto each other as physical dimensions, concrete *weltanschauungen*, cultural layers or mental stories. This interpenetration of different syntaxes is a very common experience nowadays, and it often explains our feeling for certain sites and situations. The charming accidents produced by the casual encounter between the classical orders and the patterns of the older vernacular (the cow watching the train, the irregular division of rural plots still readable in the layout of a neo-classical city, etc.) are the ancestors of a great variety of situations where this superimposition of scales and languages is only cruder, more complex or less solved. In fact, this overlapping, or *verticalization* of the idea of landscape, strikes me as being precisely what many artists and landscape observers seem to be exploring. I think of those painters, photographers or filmmakers who are chasing not only the edges (where a world meets another world), but the equivocations by which a landscape survives among or beneath other ones, or else deepens to become several landscapes floating on top of each other. Indeed, this condition of overlap could summarize the issue of suburbia (at least in Europe), where both

Opposite: Agnih eumsan et wisi tiniam iril
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the superimposition of totally different syntaxes and the clash between the solid and the provisional and the permanent and the transient are the most dramatic. In the suburban condition which is now ours, every site is basically a hyperlandscape.

Theater

But let's get back to Jackson. The final point of his essay was to say that we needed to free ourselves from the canonical model of Landscape Two, and devise a new definition of landscape that would include "both the mobility of the vernacular and the political infrastructure of a stable social order."⁷ Actually, he had already addressed this issue in another essay, "Landscape as Theater," placed right in the middle of his previous book, *The Necessity for Ruins, and Other Topics*. In this dense little piece, he stated that the operative metaphor through which the classical landscape had been envisioned and produced was that of the theater: a landscape was a scene, a stage-set visually organized from a few vantage points, or a sequence of scenes. It was an image that died hard and, despite its growing one-sidedness and irrelevance, still continued to frame the way people looked at landscapes. For Jackson, the great problem of landscape studies was that we were still under the spell of the classical metaphor of the theater, even though this representational matrix had ceased to be efficient for more than two centuries, and was thus unable to translate the complex structure of the world we live in. Only another operative metaphor (i.e., not just a mere *analogon*), more suited to what our world has become, could free our minds from this out of date representation and enable us to engage contemporary landscapes. But this other and badly needed metaphor, Jackson concluded, was lacking: "We are still searching.... All that we have so far come up with is an analog of one sort or another, borrowed from biology or ecology or communication theory. When it is a matter of controlling or manipulating the environment, analogs can be extremely helpful; yet if we are again to learn how to respond emotionally and esthetically and morally to the landscape we must find a metaphor—or several metaphors—drawn from our human experience

It is still too early to understand the next 20th Century landscape. We can best rely on the insights of the geographer and the artist and the philosopher. They are the most trustworthy custodians of the human tradition; for they seek to discover order within randomness, beauty within chaos, and the enduring aspirations of mankind behind blunders and failures."⁸

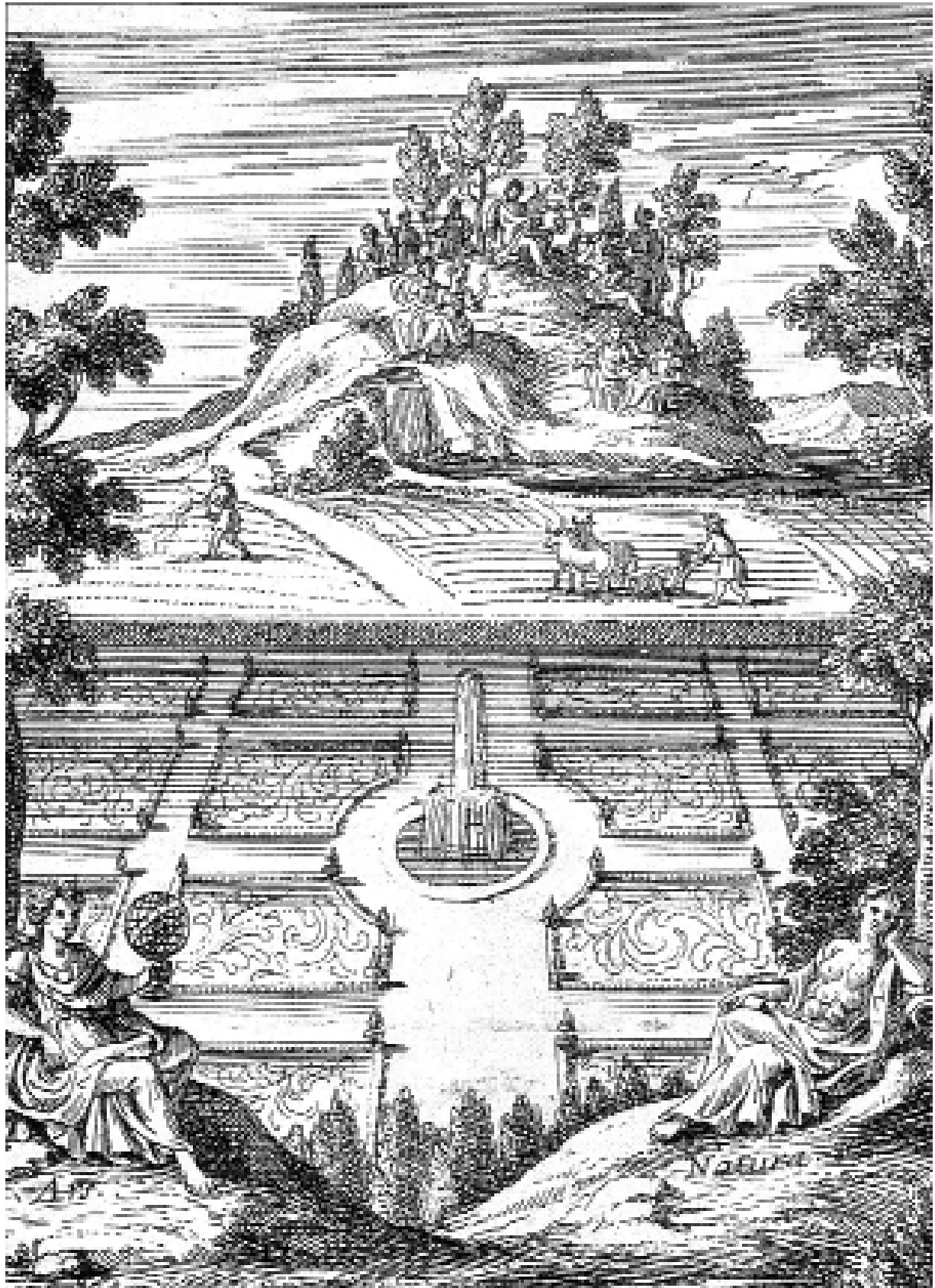
Palimpsest

If we accordingly turn ourselves to philosophers to see what they have to offer, we may get Peter Sloterdijk's "spheres" or "foam"⁹ or Bruno Latour's "actors-networks"¹⁰ and use these metaphors to decipher contemporary landscapes. But what if, instead of focusing strictly on this supposedly emerging landscape, we would embrace the whole stratification that construes our environment? What if the new metaphor we are after should correspond to actual sites, and apply to hyperlandscapes? Could geographers and artists help us here? In fact, I can think of not only one but two candidates that might then seriously replace the theater in its leading representational role, and this particularly by Andre Corboz ('Le Territoire Comme Palimpsest', 1983). Indeed, both have been already identified and proposed by scholars and designers. The first one is the palimpsest, a concept which has had an incredible fortune in the debates on urban design in the past twenty or thirty years. A palimpsest, we are told, is a thick piece of parchment which was reusable, a bit like a blackboard, but with the remarkable difference that the texts inscribed on its surface are less easily erasable, so that they would often remain as traces, partly decipherable behind or between the successive lines or layers of text. A palimpsest is thus a two-dimensional writing board that deepens into a three-dimensional matrix of signs, inscriptions and texts overlaid on one another: a handy metaphor of a territory which is thus equated to a deep surface being endlessly written on, partly cleared and scratched away, and then written upon again.¹¹

Opposite: Pierre le Lorrain de Vallemont, frontispice of *Curiosités de la nature et de l'art*, 1703. a classical representation of the landscape as theatre, in which John Dickson Hunt has taught us to read the "three natures" perspectively aligned: the first in the background, untouched, the second, agriculture, in the mid ground, and the third,

or garden, in the foreground. A gradient of the dialectics of nature and art, and a clear expression of the integrazione scenica that the classical garden sought to achieve by sublimating within its limits the various features and ingredients which were visible outside: a whole game of emblematic correspondences. In the middle of the image,

a dark abstract line (probably a ha-ha, which looks like a tennis net) neatly distinguishes the garden as representation from the landscape represented. It symbolizes the perspective hinge which articulated the here and the elsewhere in the extension of the classical landscape.



Hypertext

But the ability of the palimpsest to constitute a real metaphor for today's landscapes could be questioned. Unlike the classic theater, the palimpsest is not exactly a tool that we use in our everyday life, but rather a sophisticated image, an elaborated *analogon* of this other matrix that has maybe so pervasively replaced and digested the theatrical and panoramic one that we are hardly able to expose and describe it. It is thus no wonder that André Corboz himself, ten years after proposing this first metaphor, and along with other thinkers, moved toward another one which has everything to do with the idea of the palimpsest, but is "also much more operative in the framing of contemporary mindscapes and environments: the hypertext. Unlike a text, the hypertext is literally unreadable: it is rather a network, a means of linking, relating, and articulating a number of discrete textual resources or visual documents. In other words, it is a vehicular system or protocol that allows one to navigate between those different resources—all relatively independent and standing for themselves, all deploying their own syntaxes, orders and meaning—without virtually imposing any given hierarchy or sequence to the semionaut's travel. By saying this, we do not mean that this network or system has no order nor hierarchy but that it empowers the user to freely shift and slide at will from one resource to another and to improvise bridges or stairs between distinct layers of meaning and information whose relationships are not a priori fixed nor mapped. In a way, the hypertext could be compared to an indefinite book without binding, or to a superpalimpsest made almost as transparent as sky or water.

All things considered, I would willingly combine those two analogs (the palimpsest and the hypertext), rather than choose one against the other. While the palimpsest contributes a much needed dimension of materiality, givenness, gravity, inertia, and care which the hypertext lacks by itself, the latter conveys notions of potentialities, links, relations, navigation, and choice without which our palimpsestuous territories would freeze into as many antique shops. In other words, if neither the palimpsest nor the hypertext are by themselves the new metaphor we are looking for, their combination might well indicate what this new metaphor should achieve: a deeper and more vertical understanding of landscapes and territories, allowing both to combine a higher degree of environmental autonomy, consistency, and resilience at the local scale, and openness, porosity and interconnection at the regional and global scales—a confederation of quasi-worlds.

Sub/Super

Years ago, reflecting on the significant contributions that landscape designers (and architects) were making to the field of "urban design," I devised a little diagram which distinguished, very schematically, three different dialectics of program and site in this field. To the main and central one, because it is the most commonly accepted, I reserved the name "urbanism." The paradigm of urbanism is the "city" and its "urbanity," and its ambition is to produce, by means of convention or composition, an either static or dynamic equilibrium between site and program, understood as public and private spaces, ground and figure, voids and solids, and so on. Even though it may assume different attitudes, aesthetics or references from Beaux-Arts to "contextualism," urbanism is thus a rhetoric of convention between two poles considered as fundamentally distinct and equally significant whose modes of interaction are the DNA of the city. It traces its roots back to the founding fathers of the discipline (Cerdà, Sitte, Poëte, etc.) and since the advent of postmodernism it has evidently represented the mainstream understanding of urban culture. But in the past decades, two alternative dialectics of design (heresies?) have challenged this idea of urbanism and the very idea that ours is still an "urban condition."

On the one side is what I have called super-urbanism. It basically considers that the accelerated urbanization of the world has created a new condition a "global village" or "generic city," where the city has absorbed its traditional other (the country). This creates a "reality shortage" which calls for a super generation or fast-breeding in the guise of the super-city or metropolis. Accordingly, super-urbanism develops as a dialectics of design in which the site is literally taken over and produced by the program. The program engenders the site, and all the mapping techniques and topographical tools of the *analysis situ* are transposed into building concepts. Even though the work of OMA/AMO cannot be entirely reduced to this vision, Rem Koolhaas may be considered the main poet of this metropolitan condition, and *Delirious New York* the undisputed manifesto for super-urbanism.¹²

On the other side is a reverse subversion of urbanism, which I called sub-urbanism. Instead of exasperating the idea of the city from above, it undermines it from below, by reverting to the site as the potential generator of program. In this alternative perspective, the post-city age is less metropolitan than literally sub-urban, amounting to a dissolution or dislocation which calls

for a local reinvention of the collective geared to the careful management of the site's specific resources and potentials, and to the enhancement of its relative autonomy and resilience. A site is more than just an area defined by its limits. It is a place, more or less identifiable by its core or its ambience, a complex of resources, people and memories (humans and non-humans), whose relative degree of possible self-sufficiency (both economic, political and cultural) enables it to function as a quasi-world within the world: a four-dimensional territorial matrix which, like a Leibnizian monad, would be absolutely unique and specific, while at the same time reflecting, mirroring or reverberating the totality. In other words, site is a place in which, or from which, individuals and communities could collect themselves and negotiate their relationship (of empathy or conflict) with the world, instead of being just drowned and brainwashed by the relentless tides of urbanization. Today, such sites are not a given, and the cities or villages which once played that role have generally lost that capacity. They must therefore be revealed or reinvented everywhere, including in the areas that have been most disoriented by the worldwide current of urbanization and flattened out by the correlative industrialization of agriculture. Sub-urbanist projects are those which explicitly tackle this issue.

Hope?

Ours is an age of great perplexity, and it is certainly difficult to decide whether our condition is metropolitan or sub-urban, or, for that matter, whether we should embrace either super or sub-urbanism. And maybe we don't have to. In the same way the metaphors of the hypertext and the palimpsest may be combined together (and with that of the theater), the respective agendas of super and sub-urbanism can also (hopefully) be made compatible. Unlike compositional urbanism, neither of them considers sites and programs as given per se, nor that the jurisprudence or the tool-box of urbanism is sufficient to address the difficult and sometimes desperate situations in which designers are called upon to intervene. In other words, both question the relevance of the very notion of urbanism which was launched more than a century ago, at the end of the first industrial (and energetic) revolution, when the agenda had clearly become that of the expansion or extension of cities. Today, in the "peak all" situation that we are facing—which will inevitably stop urban and suburban growth—it should be clear that the agenda is not the expansion of cities but the deepening of territories, and the

enhancement of their relative autonomy. In this respect, there is between super- and sub-urbanists the same kind of difference that separates those who believe that the solution to the "reality shortage" should be searched in new large scale energy-efficient systems of production and distribution, and those who think that, this being not quite sufficient, the solution (if there is one) will also depend on people's ability to re-territorialize a significant part of their activities and leisures in quasi-worlds (or "anthropogenic islands"), stewarded to provide for some of their basic needs, and increase their resilience.

Because it constantly runs the risk of being caricatured as naïve or nostalgic (a great leap backward into some kind of idealized Middle Ages), I do feel an urge to advocate this agenda in a "relative manifesto for sub-urbanism" in a way that parallels and somehow balances Koolhaas's retroactive manifesto for super-urbanism. Its ambition is to support the conscious emergence of quasi-worlds by effectively treating sites as hyperlandscapes, able to attend locally to a variety of needs and desires, on economic, political, and cultural levels. This deepening of territories evidently requires that designers penetrate into the "parliament of things" well beyond the "urban" façade—water and energy cycles, soil restoration, phyto-sociology, ecosystems dynamics. It also calls for designs that would develop as both an art of memory and an art of hope so as to amplify the space-time respiration of sites and situations. The one prejudice commonly shared by both optimists and pessimists is that hope (like time) is a given, that you may or may not *have* it. But nowadays (as probably always), hope is certainly not a given. It may only be produced, *raised* or nurtured, which means that it is, as memory, a matter of art. Giving time to space (and space to time) is probably the main challenge in our fields.¹³ Hence, a good test to assess the value of any project in landscape design, urban design or architecture is to wonder to what extent it sustains, deepens or enhances the time matrix (memory and hope) of the considered site. The metaphors of the palimpsest and hypertext are simply convenient tools in addressing this issue.

We may well think that the ambition of early 20th century artists to discover and represent the fourth dimension amounted to pure wishful thinking. But a hundred years later, given the global environmental crisis and the energy-climate predicament we are facing, this fantasy might appear as the only serious hope worth raising. Let's be site-seers.

