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The Return of the Landscape

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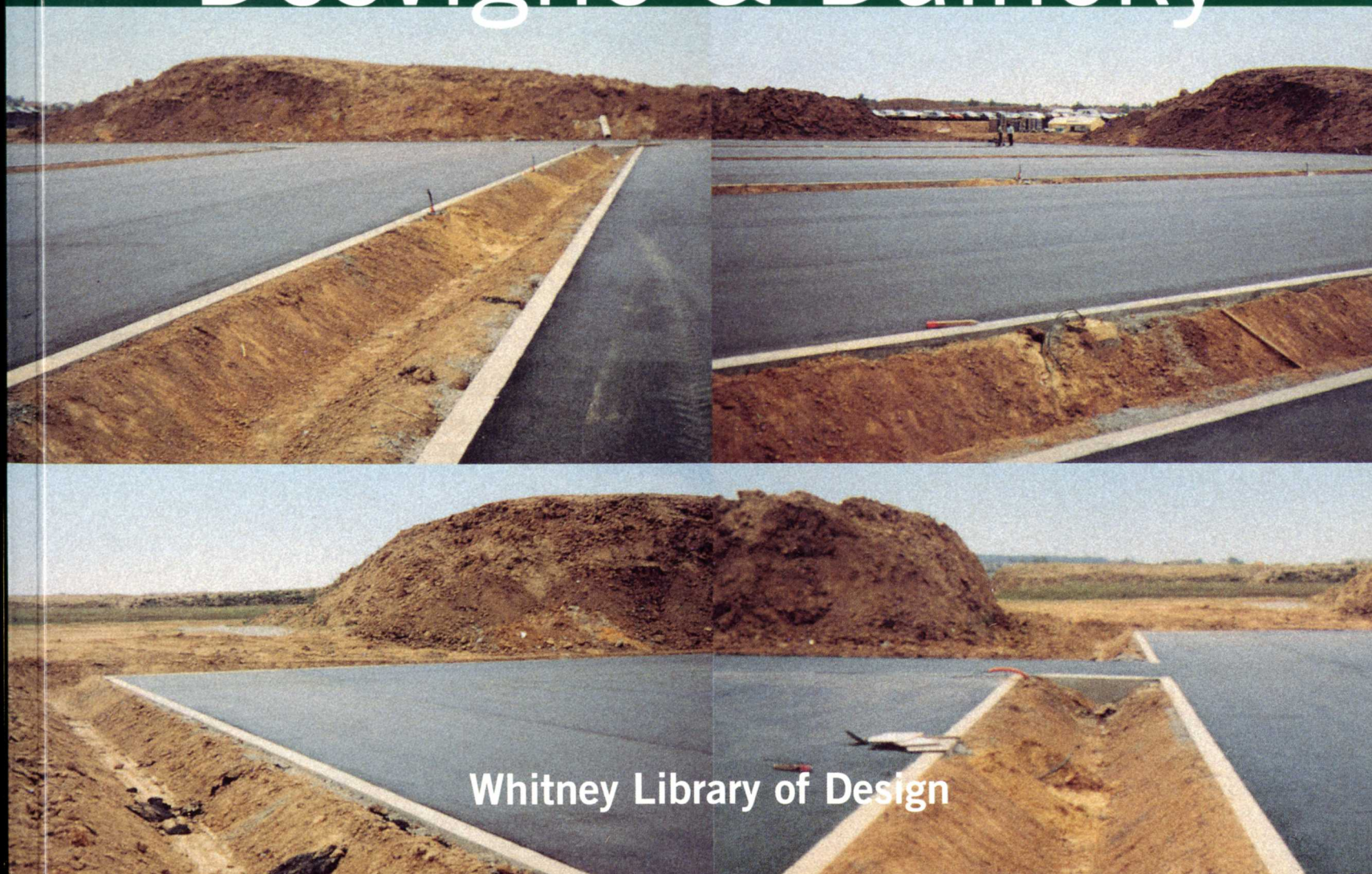
Desvigne & Dalnoky



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The Return of the Landscape *Sébastien Marot*

For the past fifteen years, a combination of circumstances has made France one of the European nations most actively engaged in the rebirth of landscape studies within the design disciplines. At first glance, this situation may seem surprising, particularly when viewed in light of the relative disrespect that was shown in France for landscape art, as well as for the art of gardens, during the preceding five or six decades. In all probability, if questioned about that period (between the 1930s and the 1980s), nine-tenths of today's architecture students or designers would be unable to name a single landscape designer or to cite a single important project. 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 nothing to say. And yet that period was full of creations, places that we visit but fail to recognize. Rather than disrespect, it would be better to speak of oblivion, almost as if a long parenthesis in history had been opened at that time, making us lose the habit of seeing and living within public spaces, parks, and open areas in general, such that we no longer looked on them as areas for design. In the final analysis, during that period it was almost as if the spaces around buildings and every other type of construction were no more than leftover empty areas, void and forgotten: necessary, perhaps, but relegated to the functional status of generic green spaces.

This sort of dismissal of gardens and landscaping, which took place during the same period, more or less, that the ideals of the modern movement surged to predominance and then declined, was particularly evident in France. This fact may seem odd, given that landscapists and specialists trained in the school of Alphand had been widely represented in France in the period immediately before this, particularly in those circles that not only gave birth to urban studies as a discipline but enjoyed brilliant success in exporting their methods and models (the city-garden, park systems, greenbelts, etc.).

Several general factors, related to economic and political trends, offer a basic explanation for this prolonged era of neglect; I will cite two. First of all, government interests, very much in evidence from the period of postwar reconstruction throughout the so-called "Glorious Thirty Years" 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. Secondly, France found itself facing, relatively late compared to other countries, the crisis of the breakup of traditional rural structures.

The combined effect of these factors — the national policy, conducted with excessive determination to create residences and services, and the conscious neglect of the economic changes taking place in the rural world — along with the absence of alternative theories from ecologists or environmentalists, accounts in large part for the one-sided success that this vision of regional management was able to enjoy for fully fifty years, being only superficially affected by the dictates of the modern movement ("from the interior toward the exterior"). This vision led to the affirmation of programs based on poor judgment and devoid of even the most elementary respect for places. Sites were evaluated in quantitative terms, as so many surfaces on which to project an image of the city broken down into its "essential functions."

By now it is a scenario that we know by heart. And we also know how businesses and public projects have come to be organized into services and specializations precisely on the basis of this clear distinction of elements and functions between the urban sector and the regional. By the time this began taking place, the new economies based on tourism, communications, recreation, distribution, and the so-called single-family home were already beginning to extend their grid into the countryside, where the structures of traditional agriculture were steadily weakening, making the countryside a vague area, undefined and without a clear future.

The final years of this one-sided construction policy (the period of the "new cities") were also the first years of today's ongoing rebirth of the landscape. This rebirth began with the attempts made by various specialists who — striving to create that "filter of vegetation" envisaged in the (often unrealized) plans for the *cité contemporaine* or the *ville radieuse* — promoted a sort of palliative to modern urbanization. Pushed into the corner by a process that looked upon landscaping as a sort of optional ingredient, the discipline of landscape design came to be more and more intimately familiar with the primary victim in this situation: the site itself. The discipline came to know the borders and edges, the areas "in between" that were neglected by designers. In so doing, the discipline learned firsthand how to take instant advantage of any opportunity to repair the damage done.

In a paradoxical way, the struggles that took place over the urbanization of peripheral areas and the *villes nouvelles* provided a sort of "on-site training" for a new generation of landscape designers. And on the basis of the experience they had gained in those struggles, these landscapists threw themselves into teaching. Many have taken their places as teachers alongside Michel Corajoud at the new École Nationale Supérieure du Paysage in Versailles, which has been transformed into a true think tank in which an alternative point of view on design is taking shape. The vision being elaborated here is not limited to merely changing the priorities; instead, it takes as its starting point not the proposed building project so much as a reading of the site itself, an examination of its possibilities. It also has a strong critical component.

During the last years of the 1970s and first of the 1980s, the development of the school in Versailles and the new approach to design that animates it coincided with an important evolution in the political-economic realities mentioned earlier. Although government policies concerning technology lost little of their authority, the move toward "decentralization" led to a proliferation of 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 a version of local development that is based most of all on the evaluation of sites and their local history. There is a sense in which a "landscape" can be taken as a value in and of itself; it can be presented as emblematic of what makes a given area special (in which case it is used as a showcase). Thus these new local markets, encouraged by national policies directing them to pay more attention to the environment, have opened up at least partially to the alternative approach in which greater importance is given to reading a site's resources and its historical-geographical attributes than to the bare realities of the building project proposed for the site. Riding the wave of this general movement toward an awareness of the public space viewed as landscape, landscape designers began finding themselves called upon to perform the role of stage designer for public spaces — when they weren't being put in charge of entire urban projects.

During this same period, France finally became aware of the true gravity of the crisis in the rural world, and with it the crisis in the agricultural economy. In an effort to prop up that drastically changing economy, various containment measures had been taken, and these were now revealed as totally inadequate, unable to hold back the crisis of the agrarian sector, which had been devastated by changes in small farm holdings, by abandonment, as well as by the growth of other economies still without their own authentic cultural place, their own site of settlement. The awareness gradually took hold that the legacy of those rural areas, the care for their resources, and the response to the changes in progress demanded an overall plan. The subject has led to an enormous amount of study carried on fervently at the national level as much as at the regional and local levels; its force reflects the emergence of an awareness of landscape as public space, and its requirements lead to landscape designers being assigned increasingly important roles as consultants or planners.

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 much of that rebirth's critical importance. For obvious cultural reasons, all contemporary European landscape designers are tied to one of two heritages, agrarian or urban, but regardless of this, those who merit particular attention are the ones who take a radical approach to the inversion of priorities effected by their predecessors and make sites and their situations the basis for any project. The specifics of site and location become the reason and raw material for projects, whose development is derived from the very fabric of the site's territory. The critical importance of this reversal is expressed in four necessary steps whose correlation, in my opinion, is of particular significance to landscape projects.

1. *Anamnesis.* This consists in looking upon an area of land or a public space as an expression of an ancient culture, as a sort of palimpsest on which one can discern the signs, visible with varying degrees of ease, of all that has transpired on the site over time and has contributed to the shaping of that specific space of landscape, to making it what it is and not something else. Anamnesis means the deciphering of those signs, stratified in the course of time, contrasting or similar, to determine those intentions and potentialities of the area that should be safeguarded and handed on. The reading is thus that of an inheritance, and the eventual project is a bequest. Although this attitude of respect for the land and the continuity it demands is by no means a prerogative of landscape designers, it does have obvious roots in landscape design theory: in the first place because the earth has its own

special nature and no one should ever meddle with it randomly, and in the second place because whatever is sown in the earth will have a long-term future that no gardener will live to see. This is the meaning of the metaphor of continuity that Michel Corajoud uses to contrast his theories to the ideologies of change or the ideologies of the tabula rasa: that of a conversation in which one cannot participate without first agreeing to listen to all that has been said up to now, and to speak up only in order to add to what has gone before.

2. *Preparation.* Since a landscape is looked upon more as process than product, any project should take on the character of an open-ended strategy. No reading of the site can ever be exhaustive, nor can it provide an "absolute image." Aware in turn of being itself in a process of becoming, a landscape design does all it can to evaluate those elements in the site that can provide indications of time, of changes in life: the cycle of the seasons, the climate, the recycling of water, the alternations of day and night, of growth and decline. By bringing these back to life, one seeks to give the residual spaces, those that have been abandoned or cast aside, the ability to revive and rejoin the present — and history — by accepting or demanding uses that are not yet foreseeable.

3. *In-depth vision.* This is the critical alternative to surface vision. The study of gardens has led to a qualitative perception of the various layers of public spaces. Rather than reading an open space as an emptiness defined by a series of surfaces and by light, in-depth vision sees the open space as a habitat in which the sky and what is underground engage in multiple relationships defined by the nature of each of them. This is a rich and complex vision, and its reading brings a project into involvement with all the layers that compose the landscape, although, of course, this involvement may be sometimes at a minimal level. The detailed identification of the qualities of an environment and its different component elements, together with analysis of their in-depth relationships, makes it possible to integrate and articulate the uses and practices of an environment, which surface vision and zoning, by their very nature, tend to separate and suppress.

4. *Relative thinking.* This final step refers to the special attention given to boundaries, adjacent areas, surroundings or backgrounds. Since landscape designers are used to working on exterior spaces and spaces adjacent to buildings, and since they are trained to revive marginal and peripheral zones (the landscaping of roadsides, of uncultivated areas, of "non-places"),they have developed to a fine art the activities of insertion, transition, and transplantation, and this leads them to prefer the relationships among objects to the objects themselves. Thus the quality of any 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, and the "calculated upgrading of adjacent areas," and it is the complex combination of these articulations that creates the overall sense of the site itself.

This "relative thinking" may well be the best summary and expression of the teachings of landscape design as they apply to the management of cities and outlying areas today, and not only because it calls on designers to consider all open spaces as relative to others, but because it proposes a thorough reexamination of exactly how any public space is used. By its very nature, "relative thinking" takes a dim view of the subdivision of small agricultural holdings, the dispersal of authority, and the breaking-up of historical relationships in the countryside, since these have been the primary agents causing the disintegration and "illegibility" of the rural landscape. In fact, "relative thinking" has led some landscape designers to reconsider their roles in general, prompting them to provide responses to requests from clients that take into consideration aspects not usually considered germane, to call attention to issues far beyond their commission, in general to transcend the limits usually assigned to such consultation in an effort to focus attention on more valid objectives. Attitudes of this sort tend to contest the system of stagnant compartmentalization and the hierarchy of responsibilities for which bureaucratic and administrative services are known. To force such clients to look upon public spaces as landscapes means forcing them to reconsider their own functions and to overcome the divisive thinking on which those functions are based; it means getting clients to allow other aims to have weight, aims that can be shared out among many people on the basis of a reworking of the way territory is directed and managed. The designs and studies of Alexandre Chemetoff are of particular relevance in this respect, since they are an example of a stance that dares to approach the provocative.

There is yet another aspect of the involvement of landscape designers in the French cultural debate that merits mentioning, since it reveals a fascinating aspect of these developments. This

is the adroitness these 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, on the other, to see landscapes (rural expanses) as public spaces and therefore as possible objectives of projects. There is a name for this buffer zone: it is suburbia, that "third world" that is so vast and that is experiencing such profound changes that one forgets it possesses its own history, a history that leads back to neither the history of the city nor to that of the countryside.

But when one seeks the design tradition behind the art of gardens or the tradition behind landscaping one is forced to turn to the study of suburban design. Quite nearly all the historical reference points in landscape architecture are derived from the suburban tradition, and it is these historical reference points that have in large part contributed to the invention and formation of such forms as the French gardens in the suburbs of Paris, parks and picturesque areas, promenades outside city walls, city gardens, parkways, greenbelts, park systems. All are outgrowths of efforts made to join the urban structure more smoothly to that of the true landscape or to tighten the loosening of the connection between the city and the country brought on by suburban expansion. The hypothesis here is that the study of suburbs, as revealed by all these efforts, was the true laboratory for the study of 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.

The most interesting aspect of the landscape studies and projects carried out in outlying areas consists precisely in this reintroduction of the long-neglected discipline of suburban studies. It is an undeniable fact that select landscape designers, linked by training to the suburban zone as the birthplace of their profession, are the only people today capable of deciphering certain sites and situations, places where other specialists see only chaos. Some areas, explain Michel Desvigne and Christine Dalnoky, "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, can 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, architecture must learn to fight back, to hide out in the hills and struggle."

It should surprise no one that the headquarters of the École Nationale Supérieure du Paysage, the training ground for this reconquest of suburbia, is in Versailles, for that city was once the area of operations and large-scale experimentation for suburbia's first, classical conquest. It was here that Michel Desvigne studied, availing himself of the teaching of a father figure (Michel Corajoud) and the example of an older brother (Alexandre Chemetoff), and it was here that Christine Dalnoky and he set up a studio that soon won them fame as the youngest team allowed "to play with the big boys."

The design projects in this book reflect an approach that is already palpably different from that of Desvigne and Dalnoky's predecessors. It almost seems that the politics of overturning ideas, begun by the "father" and carried to extreme consequences by the "older brother," have given way to the expression of a less troubled attitude, a more serene vision that is therefore freer to adopt a tone of elegance and distinction: calm, light, erudite. An attitude, carefully worked out, of detachment; less thoroughly devoted, perhaps, but also less moralistic. Looking over these projects, one gets the impression that each plays in an increasingly explicit way with the idea that we are today living through a magical moment. It is a critical moment in which the site is no longer considered merely the landing place for a project, but begins to take on the sense of being a departure point in itself. This is a risky proposition, since there are usually no striking differences between the two situations, but it is one that Desvigne and Dalnoky seem capable of handling with unwavering care and patience. One can hope that their work will make others reflect on an observation that Gaston Bardet made in 1951 in his treatise *Naissance et méconnaisance de l'urbanisme*, when he lamented that Mansart's influence on urban planning had been imposed on history to the loss of a far better example — that of Le Nôtre.