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INTRODUCTION

Christophe Girot

Topology is an abstract term designating a continuity of surface. It is usually employed in the field of mathematics to describe an entity of organised spatial relationships and proximities within surface structures. Why will this term become so significant with regards to thinking about landscape at the onset of the 21st century?

There exists a schism between the way landscape is understood scientifically, either as a functional normative network or an ecological system, and the way the same place exists cognitively, poetically, and emotionally for people. We still can't tell how topology may serve landscape architecture in the future with new forms of understanding, but the spatial disparity which prevails in today's environment calls for an entirely new approach to territorial continuity. Topology, in this sense, is not just about descriptive geometry and does not only deal with technical questions about continuous surfaces in mathematics, it also pays greater attention to the deeper poetic and philosophical meaning of a landscape, and helps us grasp as much about its making as about the perception of intrinsic beauty.

Pragmatic concerns about landscape all too often lack any kind of poetic and aesthetic consideration. The latest schools of landscape urbanism, ecological urbanism, and ecosystem services follow this trend and invite more confusion than they offer solutions. A form of remedial ecology is now being promoted as some universal landscape panacea that is oblivious to local customs and lore. We need to question these forms of scientific and normative positivism in more detail. This is possibly where topology can help point to the narrowness of our present assessment of landscape. Topology is meant to weave meaningful symbolism back into a particular place by understanding its terrain and surface condition, and by modifying the inherent significance of natural features as they interact with the purpose of man, his daily life and destiny. This is much more significant than the mere transformation of existing natural features into man-made features such as fields, groves, orchards, alleys, terraces, ponds, and mounds. Topology creates a particular intelligence of terrain by encompassing all of its continuity and complexity; the gnosis of landscape embedded in the intrinsic value of a common place.

Topology is first and foremost about conceiving and retrieving a just sentiment about a landscape that may have been all too often overlooked and neglected. With the proper tools of 3D-observation, representation, and modelling it is possible to open up a new mode of view on any given site. The goal is not to support an approach to landscape architecture under the sole guidance of universal normative methods of functionalism or applied ecology. On the contrary, topology can be used to help question critically varying landscape situations that remain troubling – particularly when inherited design typologies are transferred from one place to another without regard to the particular societal organisation and local culture they encounter.

Considerations about the meaning of a rock, a tree, a pond, a path, or a tomb, for instance, have not only to do with scientific laws of nature, but also with the deeper cultural values, beliefs, and habits that are elemental parts of a place. Topology is all about the interrelated cohesiveness of things and people; it is about how a tree meets the ground and how water sounds as it runs over a stone. We believe in crafting comfort and beauty out of landscapes in the many ways we entrust our world with deeper meaning. Topology is about developing a new set of disciplinary tools capable of responding fully to a continual terrestrial situation, and it is precisely this continuity that gives us more insight and potential when developing solutions.

How can we speak about a thing that is on the brink of occurring, that can be clearly sensed, but that has not manifested itself yet entirely? At present we have no iconic landscape project that is capable of fully embodying this particular «moment» of topology in a landscape, but there are definite signs indicating the trends to come. Something has indeed been long overlooked in matters pertaining to the common meaning of landscapes and their intrinsic potential. Topology can help fields of action that seldom cross paths habitually to merge on the plinth of territorial continuity, considerably reinforcing the discipline of landscape while opening it to others. The challenge of landscape topology is to integrate heterogeneous fields of action that can be both physical and philosophical and scientific and poetic – integrating past, present, and future potentials into a single meaningful whole. It will bring different design disciplines together to work on a better understanding of landscape as a surface and a space in all its inherent beauty and wonder.

