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SHIFT OF LANDSCAPE

Christophe Girot

Landscape finds its origins in the Dutch word *landskip*, which defines a stretch of man-made cultivated land. In the case of the ETH Zurich research studio that was conducted in Dordrecht in 2011–2012, it seems appropriate to reconsider what landscape actually means both culturally and politically in an age of rising waters. The word sustainability for once seems most appropriate here in expressing a most pressing need: that of defining what, in the flood-prone lowlands of South Holland, can actually be sustained. The topological method developed with the LVML enabled young students of architecture at the ETH to address precisely this important issue. By learning the tools of 3D landscape modeling and visualizing, they were able not only to quantify various levels of topographic intervention, but also to qualify a new kind of landscape, mixing agriculture with new forms of urbanity, energy, and nature.

Close work with local authorities as well as with experts from professional agencies helped support and frame this ambitious studio. The extreme political volatility surrounding the voluntary “flooding” of the Biesbosch and some of the oldest agricultural polders in Holland was a given that was intentionally underplayed in the framework of the studio. The studio sought a local design response to new flood regulation policies seeking to protect the greater metropolitan region of Rotterdam from cataclysmic events when high tides converge with the rising waters of the Maas and Rhine rivers. The situation is so acute that the Dutch consider opening-up their sea wall at the river’s mouth allowing for the return of an intertidal zone in and around Dordrecht. Such an approach to the management of rising intertidal waters requires an open public debate. For this reason we have invited a set of distinguished experts to discuss such issues and case studies within the framework of this Pamphlet No 16: Judit Bax, Martin Hulsebosch and Ellen Kelder; Jandirk Hoekstra; Frédéric Rossano and James Melsom; Kelly Shannon and Bruno De Meulder; Dirk Sijmons; Antje Stokman.

The ETH studio work took the flooding issue to heart and worked on very precise solutions using 3D GIS referenced models to simulate a set of potential design variants. It is of course much easier politically to show some new flooding scheme on an abstract 2D zoning plan implying conventional engineering solutions than it is to show an entire landscape project, replete with different approaches to flooding, explicitly in virtual reality. The students worked over a period of two semesters, and

the results were to be exposed in the city of Dordrecht, but for reasons of political sensitivity the exhibition of the projects was postponed. I actually take this as a true complement: Could it be that the work done by our students is simply disrupting some old habits that are not necessarily in the best interest of all? For it is both the precision and elegance of their landscape vision that one should herald, discuss, and commend.

There is reason to believe that work on such large scales of design, which is still quite unusual for architects, will become common practice in the coming decade. Landscape architecture may return to the forefront as a very precise tool of designed ecologies and urbanism. The topological approach that is being developed and taught at the ETH is going to bring some radical changes to the profession. And it is about time that landscape architecture recovers its place at the heart of a new culture of design and environmental thinking. I would like to thank the entire ETH teaching team under the guidance of Frédéric Rossano, which included James Melsom, Philip Urech, and Alexandre Kapellos, and that enabled this studio to take place. My thanks go more especially to all the D-ARCH students for their creativity and dedication, and without whom the Dordrecht landscape would have remained blind to possible futures: Siham Rafael Balutsch, Sarah Barth, Kristina Eickmeier, Nikolaus Hamburger, Nikolas Klumpe, Matthias Knuser, Oliver Kunz, Lukas Murer, Karin Niederberger, Annina Peterer, Dario Pfammatter, Raphael Risi, Rosmarie Ruoss, Petra Schwyter and Alain Weber. May all the authors of this pamphlet contribute to a more open debate on this most critical issue concerning our landscapes.
