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Vers une Nouvelle Nature

Christophe Girot

There is growing interest in landscape architecture. Is it just a vogue; or does it express a deep societal need, rooted in the desire of people to establish a strong new relationship to nature in their cities? Defining this new relationship is probably one of the biggest challenges of the next decades. It is about reinventing a nature that we appreciate and understand in the architecture of our daily lives. Landscape is no longer confined to the exotic escape of a natural retreat, it has become an integral part of the common world we live in and identify with. New landscape designs are needed to explore the specific qualities, potential and use of nature in urban space. This *nouvelle nature* is meant to enhance our senses and reconcile us with a sense of belonging. It is first and foremost work on a reduced and symbolic form of nature, and marks the advent of a new relationship between public space and dwelling.

The prevalent attitude of European cities towards nature is not just the product of the last post-war decades, it is in fact the result of a complex tripartite division that has evolved since the early Industrial Revolution. This two-hundred-year-old separation of nature into three distinct parts runs along the lines of: – An unreachable and yet mythical wilderness still to be discovered; – A nature entirely tamed and acclimated, masterfully arranged in promenades and parks in the heart of cities; – A vast zone of conspicuous neglect where what is left of residual nature is mixed with industry and infrastructure. One could coin these three realms of nature as: exploration, admiration and contempt. But the trilogy has evolved over time, and so have societal goals and mores. The fact is that our understanding of nature has shifted, one could almost say migrated to the point of reversal. It is therefore important to reflect and reassess the validity of this construct in light of current evolutions.

Exploration

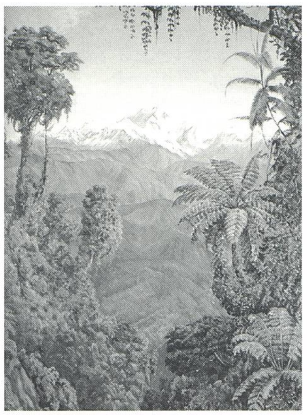
In the case of nature as a mythical wilderness, the great naturalists of the last two centuries brought forth the idea that a contact to true nature could only be attained by escaping to the most remote and wild places of the globe. The cult of exotic and naturalist travelling became a logical extension of the fashionable voyages to Italy of the European upper class. The English 19th century naturalist painter Marianne North best exemplifies this shift towards an aesthetic of the exotic in nature.[1] Her paintings have little to do with the traditional English landscape watercolours of the Cotman School, they express a new vision of nature, a vision that is bountiful, unbounded and elsewhere. This fascination with the attainment of distant nature became a guiding force that gradually led to an en masse tourism to countless destinations. Almost anybody who wishes, may now go on some trek up the Machu-Pichu, for a camel ride down the Sahara Desert, or a tour of mysterious Bali in a matter of hours. Each one expects a unique and authentic experience, a communion with local culture and nature, different as much as possible from one's day-to-day life.

The promise of an exotic wilderness, larger than life, has reached a point of no return. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein's words: "there is no there, there". Global consciousness about the current state of the world, the rapid depletion of nature and the sudden climate deterioration has produced a significant reversal in the enthusiastic quest for far-fetched nature. People seem more prepared to stay in the vicinity of familiar places than before. The will for exploration, a probably very deeply engrained human trait, still exists; but we have shifted the scale of our movements. This shift in scale translates into a return to a simple and domesticated nature; from wild exploration to a more tame equivalent.

Admiration

The case of tamed nature arranged in parks and promenades is quite different from the precedent. Civil engineers and hygienists of the 19th century coupled with the very first landscape architects, proclaimed that this new

1 Marianne North: *A Vision of Eden*, The Royal Botanic Gardens, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Publishers, 1980



Mount Kinchinjunga, Darjeeling, India, painting by Marianne North, 1877

form of applied nature could be masterfully designed and controlled for the greater pleasure of all. These urban oases at the heart of cities were an instant success. They provided an entirely new setting for society, with the tacit help of carefully chosen plant specimens that is. The purpose in this case was much less exploration than admiration for the wonders of progress and arranged nature. The introduction by Alphand of the asphalt path in the Champs Elysées' gardens of Paris juxtaposed technical radicality with a fully mastered sense of the gardenesque. The 19th century promenade became a place for the mutual encounter of the gentry, where the nature in place was admired and maintained according to specific canons of beauty and good taste. The key words were progress and conventional embellishment. Urban nature such as this acquired a status that incorporated its dynamic and technical requirements in the overall infrastructure of the town. There was, for a given moment in time in the mid-to-late 19th century, an extraordinary symbiosis between nature, infrastructure and architecture. The parks and promenades markedly improved the quality of life of neighbourhoods, and they also considerably increased the real estate value of buildings in the vicinity. It seemed as if everything fitted together. Urban parks and promenades were often combined with luxurious architecture to produce what one still calls today the "beaux quartiers". The image of perennial tranquillity generated by these urban landscapes still prevails to this day.

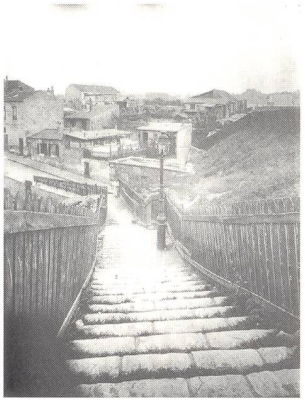
Why did the model of parks and promenades of the 19th century fail to develop into successive generations of neighbourhoods in the 20th century? Part of the answer resides in the prevailing spatial mangle at the periphery of towns, which did not allow for the system to expand. But the main reason for the abandonment of this model lies elsewhere. Conceived at a time when labour was cheap, abundant and well trained, these parks are no longer reproduceable. They are also ill adapted to current uses and can no longer maintain the established idea of a quiet urban communion with nature. They have, in fact, become the public receptacle of a changed society, where polite manners have dissolved into general indifference and sometimes even neglect.

The original concept of the parks and promenades model was to create a continual network of green across the city. Nature was meant to be the social lubricant capable of alleviating pressure from overcrowded quarters, offering a symbolic, albeit rather minimal glimpse of the seasons to the harried population at large. But because of the extraordinary real estate pressure on city centres, it has become impossible to envisage the duplication and expansion of these existing green structures into the outskirts of town. The most emblematic example of such an impossible extension is the Grand Axe in Paris. It took literally decades of patient step-by-step discussions and competitions to push, albeit in a totally construed and brutal manner, the established axis running from the Tuileries Gardens to La Défense, beyond into the peripheral jumble of Nanterre to finally reach the Seine. The extraordinary physical resistance of the suburban tissue of Nanterre to this Haussmannian gesture, demonstrates clearly that such an approach has reached strong physical and historic limits, and can no longer be generative of new urban landscapes in the periphery. If that is the case, the park and promenade model belongs to the realm of the past. It is an endangered species of urban form which can at best be cherished and admired like some beautiful fossil of the past.

Contempt

The third case concerns nature as a spontaneous left-over of industrial projects and infrastructures that were undesirable in the elegant quarters of the 19th century city. This nature of contempt, so to speak, is the antithesis of a well-groomed and policed nature as in the previous case. Here it is the product of rejection. It is raw, generated by erosion and degradation, and completely anaesthetic. It is the direct by-product of industrial and commercial necessity, a nature of the slums and railway tracks, a nature of coal piles and warehouses, a nature of sullied waters and debris. It took on the shape of

The Tuileries Gardens, Paris,
Photo by Ch. Girot, 1984



The Zone around Paris,
Photo by Atget, 1860

industry at its fringes, with vast platforms and yards obliterating the ground, rivers deviated into canals and industrial basins, topographies made of rubble piles and pits. This was an experimental and mutant nature, where foreign materials, toxic materials and seeds from distant lands blended all together in the original mud of the ground. Such unsightly nature did not correspond to the aesthetic canons of parks and promenades, and was for that reason not acknowledged as such. As the city grew into the 20th century and densified, the prior dejections and their corollary bits of nature that were originally on the outskirts became gradually incorporated in the very fabric of the city. The great, inextricable and resilient mosaic of the suburban zone had begun, without any consideration for the appropriateness and overall coherence of its structure.

Impressionist painters like Pissaro, and photographers like Atget and Brassai were the first to depict the "zone" around Paris in the late 19th century. It is interesting to note that this nature of dejection became also the support for a nature of subsistence with its array of small garden allotments and fruit trees tucked-away in the most contrived corners. Later, Henri Cartier Bresson and Robert Doisneau, with their extraordinary photographs of post-war *terrains vagues* (wastelands) around Paris, confirmed the existence of this other nature. Their neorealist pictures showed that upheaval and industry were an integral part of the landscape, and that thousands of people lived and identified with that reality. The *terrain vague* was, for that matter, the polar opposite of the 19th century park. According to the French sociologist François Beguin, the *terrain vague* was open, undefined and allowed for all sorts of unconventional possibilities to happen from the unbridled lovers' escapade to the family picnic and the neighbourhood fair.[2] This nature born of contempt seemed, ironically enough, to be the most resilient and prevalent of the three. But little of this raw material has in fact survived to this day, and the expression of new natures in the suburban fabric must find other ways. Far from seeking to derive an aesthetic genre from these prior conditions, it is important to understand how to operate with them for visions to come.

2 François Beguin: „Vagues, vides,verts", in Marot, Sébastien: *Le Visiteur 3*, Paris, 1997, pp. 56-69

The Return of Nature

Why do we need to define a return to nature in the city? The three pillars upon which our understanding of nature rests, no longer hold their promise. We must be critical of our conventional wisdom on this matter, and need to change the foundations of our thinking of nature radically. A new nature can be urban, accessible and sustainable. It can neither be idealized, nor become degenerative; and must hold a dynamic course over time. The key to this new form of nature, *nouvelle nature* if you will, is based on three main factors. The first of these factors is time. Time expresses all the care and patience required to construct such a nature in the existing context. The second of these factors is the anthropology of nature, where the well-being of people in relation to nature fosters a strong sense of belonging and identity. The third and probably most critical of these factors is the physical reinstatement of natural structures in the urban fabric. The road leading to this *nouvelle nature* cannot be utopian, it must be pragmatic and find its roots in the very substance and potential of present situations.

Time

Designing with nature takes decades, it involves processes that require time to implement and foster. Landscape architecture is probably one of the last subversive disciplines in modern society, because it counteracts short-term politics and other economic urgencies with the temporal inertia of nature. New nature projects require a follow-up over decades, in order to establish a mature framework, and for this very reason, the appreciation of time in landscape design is hard to mediate. In a world of consumption, people have grown to expect instant, ready-made results. It is probably easier to

Bathing in the Marne, Joinville,
Photo by Robert Doisneau, 1930

Flood of the Wal river in Holland,
Photo by Ch. Girot, 1995

turn back and glorify a world belonging to our forefathers that is abundantly documented and known, than it is to project blindly into a landscape for future generations. Landscape architecture, for that purpose, requires the strong and convincing vision of an evolving nature, with a clear understanding of the patient processes at stake. It is primordial to communicate clearly how such a landscape project will take time to unfold.

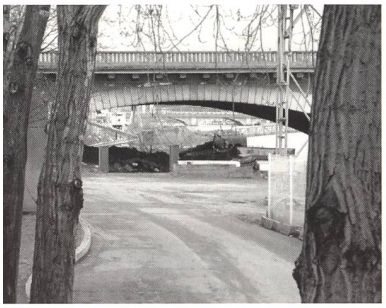
Anthropology

A new anthropology of nature will generate founding myths that are in tune with our society. Nature as a nurturing force, instead of being relegated to some distant and exotic destination, or to some reference of the past, will find its place locally. In this process, contemptuous landscapes of dejection recover acceptance and humanity, and become the crucible of a revitalized and somewhat urban naturalness. The example of the *Paris Plage* experiment over the last two summers is an important case in point. The closing-down of the central Paris riverside quais to automotive traffic during one month, and their transformation into an instant beach promenade indicates fundamental changes in the appreciation of "local" nature. Despite the incredibly polluted and untouchable waters of the river Seine, the public from the inner and outer city swarmed to this place. The numbers were astounding: 2 1/2 million people in one month! It expresses a communion with nature of a particular kind, replete with artificial sand beaches, palm trees and sun bathers. A similar phenomenon, although less crowded, can be observed each summer in the once derelict area of Letten in central Zurich. The recent appropriation of this industrial canal waterfront as a place of leisure and delight for people, as opposed to a place of drugs and blight, shows the extent to which the anthropology of a place can influence its identity. Essential ingredients such as sun, water, food and air are there without any frills, and it is less an ideal of nature that prevails in such places, than the ideal of a town finally reconciled with its river as a dominant element of nature.

The key to the success of such urban natures is essentially the well-being of crowds. Crowds where each one seeks to individuate her or his conformity, and where the sense of belonging is expressed through the notion of being at the right place, at the right time together with others. In this case nature, urban nature that is, becomes a fluid link between people, capable of procuring soothing effects on the stress of life; in a way akin to that of the 19th century parks. But our society tends to confuse more and more the well-being of the body with the well-being of nature. And when Mother Nature rebels and destroys our environments through floods, landslides, wind and fire, it breeds deep resentment and distrust in the popular unconscious. This breach of faith, which has been amplified in recent years by some notable changes in climate, could in fact become the cornerstone of a new, less selfish, and more gregarious attitude towards nature. A new anthropology of nature could spell an end to the romantic and solitary myth of nature inherited from the past century, and consolidate a new balance between city dwellers and their immediate "natural" surroundings.

Structures

The physical reinstatement of natural structures in urban areas is a key point in the establishment of a *nouvelle nature*. The single and most determinant natural factor to deal with is without doubt water; but topographic, climatic and vegetative factors can also play an essential role in the durable structure of a city. The extraordinary floods and droughts that have happened in recent years in Europe question an important part of our civil engineering heritage. The environment has become less stable and less predictable than before, hundred-year-floods tend to occur almost annually. Entire water infrastructures, such as river corridors, are now obsolete because of inadequate calibration. For that matter, cities that are impermeable and piped must adapt to the zero run-off rule, where rainwater is stored by each building in each neighbourhood to avoid glutting rivers. The massive recalibration of major waterways such as the



Bridge on the Seine at the Porte d'Ivry.
Photo by Ch. Girot, 2002

The end of the Promenade, Paris Porte d'Ivry.
Photo by Ch. Girot, 2002

The Black Hole, Boulevard Massena Paris.
Photo by Ch. Girot, 2002

Po, the Elbe, the Danube, the Rhone and the Rhine, are the next major landscape projects for Europe. Each river project will enable regional identities to emerge from the cities, soils, climates and topographies encountered.

André Guillerme, a French engineer and historian, specialist in the evolution of urban water structures in Europe, predicts the next step in the hydraulic evlution of the territory as that of an *aquosité urbaine* (urban "aqueousness").[3] His hypothesis sounded a little far-fetched ten years ago, it has become much more credible in the present context. Drawing examples from abroad and particularly the river Tsumida in Japan, he claims that cities must give in to rivers and adapt their structures to a seasonal flood-bath. The postulate is clear: when rivers overflow and expand their bed laterally, the architecture, infrastructure and landscape within this zone adapts accordingly. The scale of such an aqueous change is immense, ranging from Prague to Hamburg, Ulm to Budapest, Zurich to Rotterdam, Sion to Arles, Bellinzona to Ferrara. The implications are not just trans-national and regional, they are also very concrete and local with respect to engineering, architectural and landscape architectural projects. A *nouvelle nature* in this case is not so much a matter of taste or ecological opinion, it is a matter of societal survival and physical coherence. History has shown since the most remote antiquity, that major hydraulic changes in the territory have always provoked deep shifts in civilization. Whether this is the case at present is still unclear. One thing is certain, however, we have entered an era where the whims of nature will impose their law, a law that we must cope with and adapt to.

The Missing Link

Traditional opposition between the analytical world of planning and the applied world of design has led to a symptomatic confinement of projects at either local or regional scales. This bicameral partition reflects not only a patent absence of dialogue between planning and design disciplines, it points to a missing link at the scale of the urban landscape. This missing link reflects a deeply rooted political and professional reality, where large scale planning supersedes and local design ignores common aspirations. It coincides with what one could call the intermediate scale in landscape architecture, a scale where many urban fragments come together and often contradict the overriding natural congruence of a site. The intermediate scale concerns territories ranging roughly from 100 hectares to 1000 hectares where the physical, economic and political complexities are such that they remain more often than not unresolved.

This intermediate scale is precisely the level at which a *nouvelle nature* must be redesigned and implemented. It corresponds to the missing pieces of a territorial puzzle, where both planning and design necessarily come together in a creative and constructive dialogue. It can be the most disgraceful of scales, because of the shear complexity of its political and financial processes, where pragmatic proposals often come up against municipal and other legislative barriers. But it can also be the most rewarding of scales because of its clarity and capacity to reinstate a durable vision and coherence in a landscape over time.

The importance and pertinence of this missing link implies an in-depth change not only for designers and planners, but also for the entire social, political and economic decision-making structure of a country. The intermediate scale will become a reality only when it is understood as a priority at all levels of society. It is first and foremost a question of faith and necessity. For instance, the grass-roots environmental movement of the 1960's in Switzerland that saved the lakes and rivers from the fatality of pollution is a good case in point. The water of these "urban" lakes has gradually returned to the level of drinking quality, thanks to considerable efforts and colossal investments over decades. The common goal shared and approved by all, was that of clean water, a symbol deeply synonym of Swiss landscape identity. The effort transcended all the political and legislative barriers that existed at the time, and resolved the problem entirely

3 A. Guillerme, G. Hubert, M. Tschuya, *Aquosité Urbaine*, Recherches Cahiers, Laboratoire Théorie des Mutations Urbaines, Institut Français d'Urbanisme, Marne la Vallée, Avril 1992

The landscape of downtown Affoltern, Zurich. (Zehntenhaus Platz) Photo by Georg Aerni, 2003

The „Waterback" (die Nordküste) of Affoltern, Zurich. Photo by Georg Aerni, 2003

Social Housing with Goats in Affoltern, Zurich. Photo by Georg Aerni, 2003

at all scales of territory. Could the vision of a *nouvelle nature* in Europe acquire such support and become a political priority? The arguments are all there, and it is now more a matter of belief and communication whether it will be actually perceived as such and acted upon in years to come.

Nouvelle Nature

Considering the end to the idea of nature inherited from the past, what are the alternatives for generations to come? The three realms of nature that structured our understanding at the time of the Industrial Revolution: exploration, admiration and contempt, can be correlated with the three contemporaneous factors of a return to nature: time, anthropology and structure. When coupled in the following manner: time versus contempt, anthropology versus exploration, and structure versus admiration, they produce an interface where the portrait of a *nouvelle nature* can emerge. Time versus contempt juxtaposes an earlier contempt for space at the periphery of cities, with the present contempt for time and slowness in our towns. If anything positive can be derived from this juxtaposition, it must be the reinstatement of the subtle art to modulate time in space, and to change gradually the pace of our lives.[4] Anthropology and exploration share a common denominator, namely that of promiscuity. The sense of authentic discovery in natural wilderness has dwindled because nothing new is left to be found; instead we have shifted our curiosity to the promiscuous exploration of crowded urban natures. This gregarious bonding to nature at the heart of our cities shows the paradox of the present situation in which a symbolic, albeit minimal level of nature often suffices. Structure and admiration operate along the lines of an established and recognisable syntax of nature. The appreciation of new structures of nature can only happen when they are revealed in all their coherence and continuity within an urban environment. *Vers une Nouvelle Nature* is not just a phrase amongst others, it is the complete language of a reinvented nature for the contemporaneous city.

4 Pierre Sansot: *Du bon usage de la lenteur*, Paris: Payot / Rivages, 1998

It is time for a new architecture of the landscape to prevail and set forth the new physical conditions of the city. This entails that both planning, engineering and design capacities be brought together to create a consistent qualitative environment. The architect can no longer work on a window detail without asking what it frames on the outside. The engineer and planner can no longer draw plans for an entire region without understanding their physical impact on the intermediate and local scales of design. The goal is to re-establish the primacy of strong natural structures in the general urban context. These structures must be capable, in the classical planning sense, of uniting the most distinguished gardens of the inner city with vast natural entities in outlying areas. But they must help, first and foremost, to redefine the entire natural fabric of the city. For instance, the collection of water run-off at the scale of a city could be declined in exquisite architectural water gardens, wonderful neighbourhood basins and ponds and exciting new waterfronts and "waterback" areas.

The borders of the contemporaneous city must be defined in order to establish new quality and value at its edge. The periphery can no longer be viewed, nor be accepted as the product of decades of dejection, it must achieve a complete reversal in the physical quality and design of its natural environment. The city will contract into a dynamic landscape structure composed of new and amended natural environments adapted to contemporary use. It is in fact the city's landscape fringe that will confer a new and structured "natural" identity to the city. We must accept to enter into the natural rhythms and conditions that are given locally, and adjust our quality of life to these factors. Only then will we achieve a better integration of nature in our cities. This *nouvelle nature* is a work of faith and patience over decades, an effort meant to change durably the architecture of the landscape in the city. It is a vision of nature that we all have to espouse in order to bring Eden closer to our doorstep.

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Gabriele Basilico
Beirut 1991

Sul piano emotivo si trattava soprattutto di combattere il sentimento di dolore che avevo provato non appena entrato in questa città, la cui bellezza era tanto impressionante quanto lo era la sua distruzione.

Guardandola da lontano la città, sembrava affetta da una malattia della pelle. Una malattia "spaventosa" che sottolinea l'assurdità di qualsiasi guerra.

Mi sembrava che alcuni se ne fossero andati e che altri stessero per arrivare. Tutto sommato la situazione poteva sembrare quasi normale: la città era solamente caduta in un lungo periodo di attesa.

Gabriele Basilico è architteto e fotografo a Milano