

# Merging landscape, architecture and urbanism : an interview with Alejandro Zaera Polo

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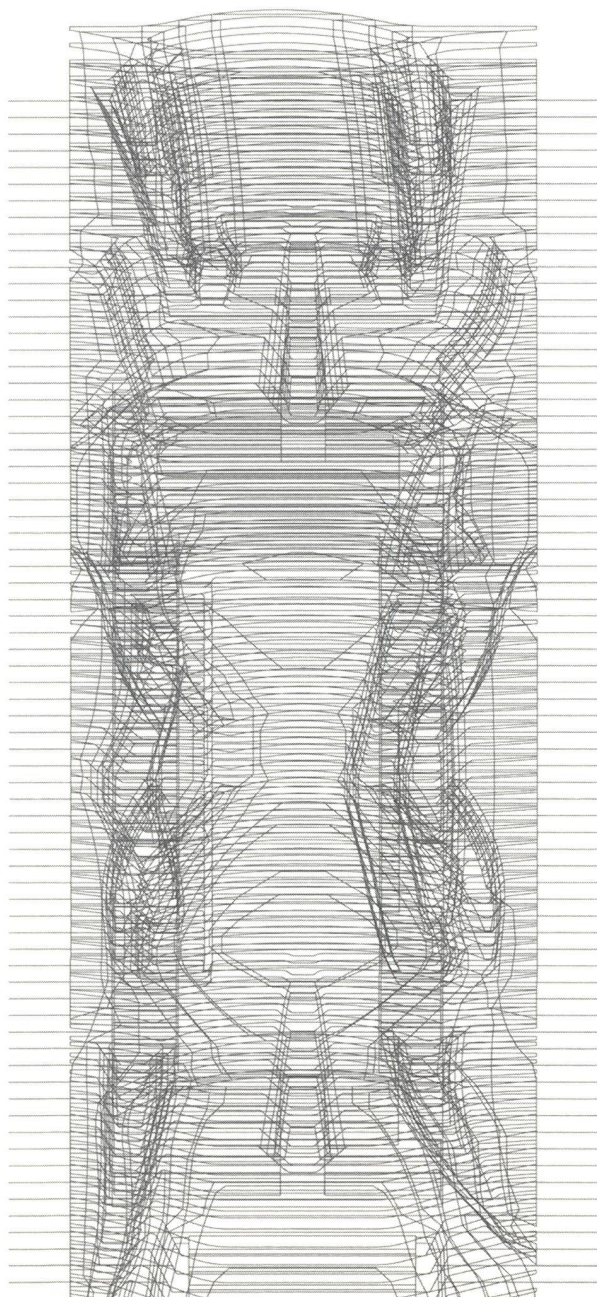
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# Merging Landscape, Architecture and Urbanism

An Interview With Alejandro Zaera Polo

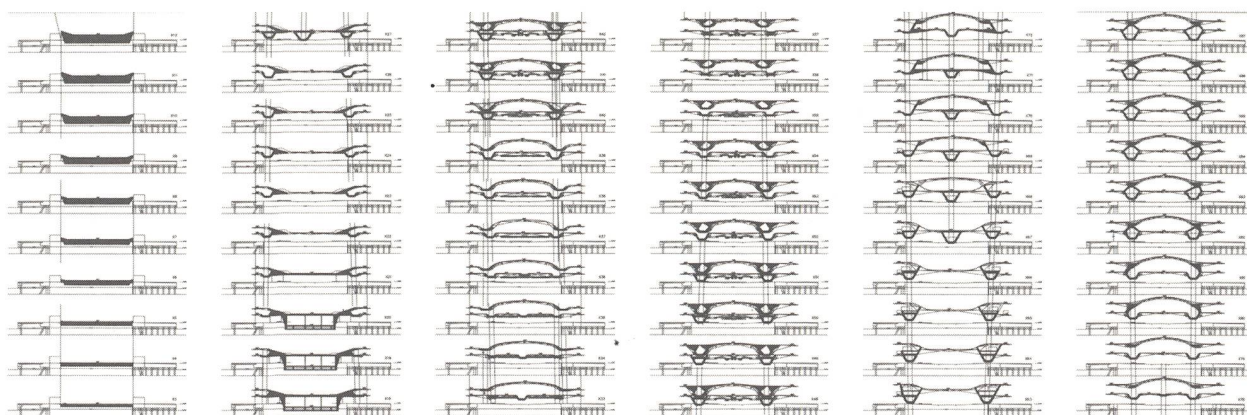
Aurel von Richthofen  
Lorenz Kocher



*trans:* In your recent work you have tried to overcome the gap between the rational and the organic that conditions the relation between architecture, landscape and urbanism. Could you describe this process?

AZP: I think that one of the interesting things that is happening now is that these fields that obviously used to be connected, and used to have a particular type of expertise, are increasingly more and more interdependent. So you can see a lot of architects doing landscape, a lot of architects doing design of objects, a lot of landscape architects doing architecture, a lot of designers doing architecture, so there seems to be a certain confusion of gender. These domains of practice once used to be separate and are now interconnected. I think that fusion in scales, in different techniques of manipulating the environment, creates an increasing confusion between the organic and the rational. Between the organic and the traditional there has also been a great line of division in the field of architecture, landscape and urbanism. In architecture you can name Mies van der Rohe versus Frank Lloyd Wright, or Le Corbusier versus Alvar Aalto. It is a kind of division where you choose whether you want to mimic nature or you want to replicate nature or you want to construct an organisation that is mainly generated by an internally consistent order. This is one of the more interesting phenomena occurring now, mainly, I think, with the increasing availability of computer technologies. They allow us to produce a level of complexity that is similar to natural organisations, while being strictly controlled by a rational order. There are a number of reasons why this fusion is happening. It relates to larger processes that are occurring on a kind of economic, political and social order. Then again, we have a field of technical opportunities arising across these domains of reality that were previously separated.

*trans:* When the natural and the artificial merge and become indistinguishable, how will this affect architecture in the near future?



Cross sections of the Yokohama Ferry Terminal

AZP: I think that some of the effects that come out of this merging of the natural and the artificial are already visible. Almost everywhere in shopping malls and highways you see the emergence of environments. These environments are a new form of nature that enable us to produce natural environments in the most artificial conditions. This is something that was almost not possible before. In the other direction, what you see now is that structures which were usually regulated by very singular and linear order are taking on organisation forms that are very close to nature. And even in the way of our own perception of the city we are thinking about the buildings more as natural constructions, almost as living creatures. I always say that architecture is the engineering of material life. This material life is the idea that the buildings have a life and have a program. The buildings change over time and are virtually living creatures that you can grow. There are species of buildings rather than types. All these categories are part of the potential that we can discover today. I think that architects, landscape architects and urban designers are in a kind of avant-garde situation.

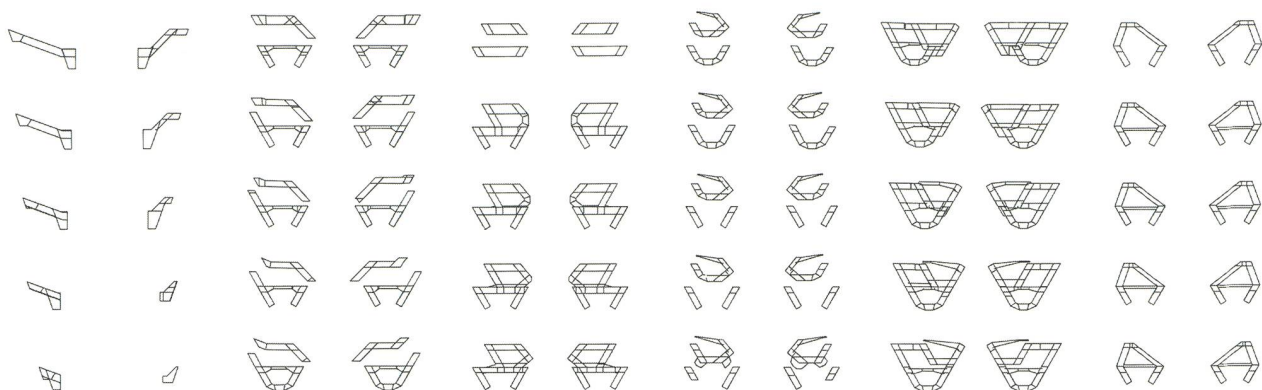
*trans: Your practice challenges the traditional disciplines of landscape, urbanism and architecture. If these categories are obsolete by now, what kind of new vocabulary needs to be introduced?*

AZP: I think that one of the outcomes and the consequences of producing architecture in the way we do it is that architecture is no longer what it was mainly in the seventies, the eighties and the nineties: a matter of language. Language was a central piece of the whole architectural debate since the late sixties, and theories of architecture were very much based on theories of representation and architecture as a kind of vehicle of something else. One of the things I'm presently interested

in, and where landscape, architecture and urbanism probably merge, is the fact that now we don't necessarily have to resort to language as a crucial category of debate, but we are simply manipulating matter. Matter in my opinion is the element of consistency of these different practices. Matter and geometry are the new objects of manipulation against language. I don't feel any need at the moment to define a new language because it is not what I think is representative of the current state of affairs. I think that is a renewed interest in material organisation. The crucial issue now is to think in terms of the possibility of increasingly complex material organisations as a kind of arrow of development. This complexity has many different forms. You can have biodiversity, you can have many different species in an ecosystem, you can have species that can survive through several ecosystems and I think that architecture from now on will have to resort to some of the classifications of natural sciences in order to rationalise and to structure this knowledge.

*trans: We will come back to the issue of geometry in your work later. How does locality influence your design process? While designing in the city centre or in the landscape, in how far do you use these different conditions?*

AZP: Locality is crucial. Mainly because material organisation is always local. Processes that obviously use flows, connections and communications across different locals are in the final analysis the specific mix of materials in a particular location. These are the most relevant issues when you start a project. The ecological system for example – the same way that you classify architecture and understand typologies as species, locations being ecosystems, the possible survival of a



Sections of structural beams evolved through the design process.

certain species in a certain ecosystem – is one analogy to locality in architecture. There is a connection across domains, as in nature where a fox can live in Central Europe, in Asia and in America, but the fox has to change. It has to change because the particular material conditions and ecosystems of these locations need the body mass, the amount of hair, the colour to be different. Species are modifying according to the ecosystem. There are a number of other analogies that I could mention. At present we are, for instance, very much interested in techniques of winemaking as an analogy to architecture. As a winemaker you know that there is a certain grape that originates from a French Cabernet Sauvignon and that there is a certain procedure by which you turn that into a special taste of wine. And you will know that this grape grows in a landscape that has a certain exposure to the sun, has a certain soil composition and has a certain level of aggregation. And if you travel and eventually arrive in California, you will understand that you can grow a similar wine there. You can reproduce these processes and there will be slight differences. That kind of relationship shows that the materials of the local are absolutely critical for architects.

*trans: Your emblematic building – the Yokohama Port Terminal – could be described as a morphogenetic attempt to react to the city on a larger scale. In how much did you apply landscape design techniques?*

AZP: I am not interested in techniques that are proper to a particular discipline. I am much more interested in their scope, how techniques can operate in different fields, for instance in the problem of making a city, or making a landscape, or making a building. In many ways the Yokohama Terminal is a building that was made as if it was a city, as if it was made by systems. If you

design a city you can't design every single building, you design the width of the road, the height of the building, the typologies of the buildings, the facades, the drainage and underground system and so on and so forth. I'm interested in the idea that the building is designed as a deployment of the complex interweaving of different systems. That's very much the way a city develops. But I'm also interested in the reverse process: The city is not just an organisation of systems, but it is material organisation and is a system that has material content and emergence. On the other end of the spectrum, I think that you can't undertake large scale plans today without taking in account the concreteness of the material entity. In that sense I'm not so very much interested in applying landscape techniques – finally, the techniques maybe/are different – I'm more interested in applying the scope to techniques that are simply material organisation techniques. They apply in different scales to different problems.

*trans: The designing process seems to be more important to you than the product itself. What measures do you take in order to control your design?*

AZP: There is a complex set of measures that you apply all the time when you are making a decision. You apply a certain process and then look at the outcome. You see whether the creature that has emerged from it will survive on certain constraints. Then you decide if you want to keep it or change it. There is a kind of feedback. I can't explain all the iterations of the process. You can see that in a project where we were finding different patterns of a fold: Some of them failed and we had to redo several positions, keeping them perpendicular to the folds, breaking them into three, then into two and finally having to calculate a kind of mediation.

*trans: This has to do with geometry?*

AZP: One of the main features of material quality is determined by geometry and matter. Therefore, it is one of the most fundamental disciplines in making architecture. To me geometry is much more interesting than language, representation and images.

*trans: How can we as designers mediate between landscape, architecture and urbanism? Do you perceive “scape” as the common ground for a discipline that is emerging out of them?*

AZP: I think I already responded to that question earlier. I would like to add at this point, specially when you talk about “scape”, that one of the interesting things that is happening now across these disciplines is not only a matter of techniques and mediation between them but an interest in irregular, incomplete forms. I think you as an architectural student and I as architect are immediately drawn to a form that is not symmetrical, balanced, like a perfect circle or a perfect square. We are interested in forms that are broken. The irregular form will evolve into a good project, the regular one into a bad one. The interest in complex forms links landscape architecture, architecture and urbanism. Its not for the sake of the shape – like some architects did in the eighties, solving design through contradiction – but for consistency. Forms that are complex can be generated through internal order.

*trans: Thank you very much for this conversation.*

This interview took place in Zurich in May 2003.  
Alejandro Zaera Polo is Principal of FOA in London and Tokyo and Dean of the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam.  
Aurel von Richthofen, editor of *trans*, and Lorenz Kocher are students of architecture at ETH Zurich.

