

# The importance of being landscape

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING LANDSCAPE

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Eelco Hooftman

How to (re)define landscape architecture in the maelstrom of globalization and the flotsam of virtual reality? Once a profession embedded in regionalism and local identity we are now the children of the Google Earth Revolution. We no longer sharpen our pencils but zap, zoom, twitter and flicker. Landscape has lost its footing and its grounding. Blindfolded we try to pin the tail on the donkey. From origin each country developed its own authentic approach – its own stance – towards landscape.

The Dutch, desperate to keep afloat under a continuous tidal deluge, created as antidote to its liquid waterscape a unique man made landscape of geometric precision and conceptual lucidity.

The Germans still worship their ancestral forest and created a Faustian pact of body and soil. Martin Heidegger played a meta-physical hide and seek when he occasionally withdrew in his 5 × 6 m. hut situated in the Black Forest on a steep slope overlooking a pastoral valley. Here he wrote on a rustic table overlooking the deep well a manifesto entitled 'Why Do I Stay in The Provinces'.<sup>1</sup> In this folksy love letter to the countryside he confesses that «the struggle to mould something in language is like the resistance of the towering firs against the storm» and «The inner relation of my work to the Black Forest comes from a centuries long and irreplaceable rootedness in the Alemannian-Swabian soil». The artist Joseph Beuys, at the Documenta 7 (1982) in a project entitled 'Stadtverwaltung statt Stadtverwaltung', planted in true German fashion seven thousand oaks each accompanied with granite bolder. The German's still insist on native trees and indigenous granite. They have neither sense of humor nor desire for exotica.

1 Heidegger, Martin: 'Warum bleiben wir in der Provinz?', in: 'Der Alemanne', 1934.

In Denmark the design evolvment from ovals into the ellipse – from Sorenson to Anderson – created a stylistic revolution and internal power struggle.

In France the notion of the absolute gaze of the baroque axis turned, after the French Revolution and the dropping of some heads, into a landscape of absolute navel gaze. The French still insist to consider each miniscule landscape as 'grand project' shaped and folded by the retreating glaciers and seismographic burps and hick-ups of the grandmasters of philosophical discourse; a postmodern pantheon comprised of the combined busts of Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

The English landscape is the result of slow weathering, wet socks and afternoon tea deluded with little clouds of creamy milk. A pastoral idyll, playground of the upper classes and safeguarded by the elite paratroopers of the National Trust.

Further up north the rugged Scottish landscape once summarized by Dr Johnston as «like a man in rags; the naked skin is still peeping out».<sup>2</sup> This naked landscape however produced a remarkable series of figureheads to the Enlightenment with the likes of David

2 Boswell recorded this quotation about Scotland in his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*: «It consists of two things, stone and water. There is, indeed, a little earth above the stone in some places, but a very little; and the stone is always appearing. It is like a man in rags; the naked skin is still peeping out».

3 Contrary to popular belief, the cuckoo clock has nothing at all to do with Switzerland. It was invented in the Black Forest of southern Germany in 1738.

4 Jackson, J. B.: «Discovering the vernacular landscape», Yale University Press, 1984.

5 A Labradoodle is a crossbred dog created by crossing the Labrador Retriever and the Standard or Miniature Poodle.

Hume, Adam Smith and James Hutton. It also was here that maverick planner Patrick Geddes from his Edinburgh Outlook Tower with its belvedere and camera obscura observed the city and surroundings and produced the «Valley Section» cross section and wrote in the slipstream of Darwin about the evolution of cities. Ian McHarg who wrote *Design with Nature* in the 1960's and became the chain smoking and whiskey gulping godfather of Regional Planning was a Scot. Of course Scotland also became the country of exile of GROSS. MAX. who's only claim to fame has been the invention of the «Ecological Wonderbra»; an uplifting mechanism for fragile ecosystems in dense and tense urban conditions. GROSS. MAX. later also introduced the notion of «Ecological Taliban» to describe hard core fundamentalist ecologist and insist upon radical nature activation instead of conservative nature conservation. Compared to the ragged and rather plum pudding shapes of the Scottish Highland the Swiss Alps are a manifesto of masculine virility. Orson Welles in the film «The Third Man» proclaimed that: «In 700 years of democracy the only thing the Swiss have invented is the cuckoo clock.» For sure the invention of the Cuckoo clock act as a massive decoy.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile the Swiss have been cunningly digging away turning complete mountains into a surreal Emmentaler cheese riddled with holes complete with cavern military airports as if unaware that the prospects of a cold war long disappeared as snow for the sun after years of political climate change. Meanwhile heaps of tunnel debris is creating a new man made Matterhorn landscapes like surreal giant alpine rock gardens. Don't be fooled. Cities like Zurich are comprised of an invisible reversed high rise – like ostriches sticking their neck into the ground – elevators going not up into the sky but instead far below into the ground to access a labyrinth of cellars and air conditioned black money bank vaults. Swiss that pristine chocolate box landscape of Heidi and Edelweiss is the greatest Pandora's box of all.

Arguably the essence of landscape is that it can be read and interpreted as a palimpsest, not a one-liner but many traces and strata of reiterated successions. Landscapes are complex and full of wonderful juxtapositions, both site and non-site. To reveal, reconcile and recompose the various traces and strata into new configurations and transformations may well be the key task of landscape architects. We once wrote that we like to reveal the layers in the landscape like a sensuous act of striptease. Such approach demands understanding of the various relationships between the a-biotic, biotic and anthropogenic factors in the landscape. It also demands an understanding of the various timescales operating in the formation of each landscape. The American geographer J. B. Jackson wrote that landscapes are deliberately created to speed or slow down nature's processes.<sup>4</sup> The kind of sensitivity and sensibility to intervene aesthetically and ethically in landscape becomes more and more overshadowed by new emerging practice of landscape urbanism. As a cross breed landscape urbanism has become the fashionable «labradoodle» of architecture programs.<sup>5</sup> Whole territories are overlaid by parametric triangulations. Indeed Landscape has become the New Emperor's Cloth of architecture and urbanism. Rem Koolhaas recently proclaimed that he has abandoned

urbanism to focus on the countryside: the territory becomes an area for work and speculation; it is «the next big thing». Not surprising in the Netherlands the most popular reality television show is called «farmer seeks wife». Join the bandwagon. Speed the plough and milk the cow; let's define the new discipline of Landscape Ruralism

Landscape Ruralism is Landscape Urbanism in reverse; it is slow, smells of manure and is non-parametric.

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