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Aspects of time in the landscape architecture of Topotek 1

1)

There is an assertion about landscape architecture that attributes to the profession a deep understanding of time. Because landscape architects deal with plants and nature, they must think about time. Other architectural disciplines often seem to find it difficult or impossible to consider the sometimes dramatic, but often subtle, changes that come with an unpredictable future. Growth and ageing, making sure that plants come back after the cold season, changing things sometimes every year <annual redesigns>, the ability to react to unforeseeable changes: These have been all gardeners' burdens, at least since the doors of Eden closed behind us. Or, put differently, ever since the loss of the absolute garden we gardeners have had to keep an eye out when it comes to shaping and using our environment.

The comprehension of time necessary to make good landscape architecture, however, is not limited to coming up with a functional plan for plant-growth over the seasons. The time that must be considered is a complex structure: Manifold, multilayered, the landscape architect's time must aim backwards and forwards, acknowledging a site's potentials both in the future and in the past. As every place has its own, proper time, the work of putting a site into its time involves shuffling and reshuffling what is there. The original material may initially be visible, touchable, present, but may also be hidden, not yet discovered. The essential work is to uncover this substance. In a very loose sense, the process of making good landscape architecture follows the practice of the archaeologist, historian or storyteller.

Topotek 1's works collapse the ephemeral layers of time in 'the now'. In allowing a site to shed the unnecessary, then developing, building, and maintaining the site from an initial set of conditions, Topotek 1 extracts a form and shape<s> space. Their claim for 'the now' may find its form as a re-invention, an update, or a strong, contrasting gesture. Still, after all their reworking of a site, the overall temporal texture of the space remains visible.



2)

Enter the garden. On entering Castle Park one leaves a diffuse modern cityscape, conceived solely for and driven almost exclusively by the production of Volkswagen automobiles. Choose any point along its open periphery: One might step in from a wide, busy traffic crossing. Descend into a green, almost remote world where the illustrious Wolfsburg Castle, built of red-dish limestone, dominates the scenery, framed in the foliage of venerable old trees. The park is a historic landscape, yet it is simultaneously a hybrid assembly of heterogeneous elements added over time and for different purposes. One finds a small baroque garden, cherry groves and horse meadows, and a central green. The pieces are kept together by the verdure and a genuinely benign atmosphere, where the historic concepts of philanthropy and Landesverschönerung show: The garden promises an industrious, better, peaceful place. The castle park as a historic landscape garden refers to this peaceful humanist ideal, but it also refers to the Enlightenment excitement about technology, and the promise that technology could parallel the pacifying character of nature. Topotek 1 restored this base set of ideas, then went further, inserting new, reflecting implants into the park. The implants, so-called 'circle gardens', are structures clad in stainless steel. Distributed throughout the park, they seem to tick, but they do not move. Depending on the light, the stainless steel structures may be hardly noticeable, shyly mirroring the lush green around them, or bright, beckoning, and metallic, like machines transplanted directly from the automotive world. The gardens alternate between decisive disruptions of the historic setting and the contrary: A respectful acknowledgement and affirmation of setting's historicity. The reflecting surface of the gardens could reflect the reflection of the other gardens. But between Topotek 1's contemporary implants, enough of the old park remains so as not to generate a visual feedback of potentially hellish force, they balance a reverberating inside and a respectfully demure exterior. As pacing devices, the circle gardens propel the park; they are possible loopholes for an accelerated travel into time.

3)

Time in the garden and in the landscape is not linear. It is retroactive and multidimensional. While carrying seeds of the future, its ground bears remains and memory. Landscape's ground and its space are layered in thick varnishes of meaningful substance. Any landscape is a plain of time. It is precisely this time that is the subject of landscape architecture: To create a landscape architecture is to shape this time-surface and compose on it. If there is something like a figure-ground relationship in this composition, Topotek 1 has found a strategy to draw on the sheet of time. This strategy is a compositional principle as much as an economy of measures, making adequate use of the layers which are available and lavishing, then accentuating, then merely pin-pricking them with additions. Topotek 1's projects feature a simple base of an elementary tonality and then a clear addition, a novelty, a marker. Sometimes this is something radical and fresh materially, sometimes just an outstanding clarity of intervention. As a landscape is stitched, patched, re-tailored, the tissue of time becomes increasingly rich.

4)

Walking up the stairs to University Square in Halle, one leaves the narrow alleys of the densely woven historic centre. At the top of the stairs one finds an open square. Or is it rather that the stairs are in the centre of the square? The folded concrete that stretches over a topographic divide of some five metres marks and simultaneously overcomes this break in the urban texture. In fact, the square, as a whole, curiously reconciles the fragments of space and time. The space is a hybrid in every sense, escaping easy categorisation. The staircase seems to be vibrantly undecided about its purpose: Is it to serve movement? Up or down? Is it to let someone rest and have a conversation? Is it a place of observation? One could say it was a park, as it is bordered by green lawns and the lush foliage of trees. A certain ease of spatial organisation and an adequate simplicity of the material come together to wake up the buildings bordering the space. The lawn turf mirrors the quiet elegance of the historic stone facades of the Robertinum and Lion's Hall, the classicist main building. A loosely strewn set of trees joins the space as the backdrop of the Campus' adjacent tree canopy. As a square, the finely textured cube-stone paving links the dignified buildings with the open facade of the newly built Auditorium; the pavement passes easily through the transparency of the auditorium's glass-wall; and, treading on granite cubes, one passes from historic ambience into contemporary air. The square transgresses the time that lingers between the buildings. It forms a cloth-like surface which envelops the open spaces in a quilt of pavement and grass





(with some interspersals - marking contemporary interventions - in concrete).

On the square an extensive bench of black-pigmented concrete sets a platform for the new generation: Large enough for whole groups to lie down and relax - or sit up and conduct a lively discussion.

5)

Landscape architecture is about growth and movement; it is about movement in space. Anywhere you look, there are bundles of different time-lines, always coexisting, each thread moving at a different speed. How does one react to these different velocities, how does one control one velocity, while allowing the other to catch up freely? How finished does a landscape architecture have to be when inaugurated, and how much space for subsequent development is there? As plants grow, they move slowly through space. We humans have faster impulses. We move quickly: Running, driving, we test ourselves against time. Topotek 1 is impatient. They need instantaneity – a desire related to an urge for ‘the now’. While it may only be embarking on a renewed development of the substance of a site, their landscape architecture is primed for consumption, yet leaves room for a second layer – maturity over time. Topotek 1 accepts that there is always a start, always a beginning, and they choose to set markers as references in time and space. Their work constitutes an initial, a first layer landscape architecture.

6)

Situated in the Mark Brandenburg, just within the highway ring circling Berlin, Dallgow Döberitz is a semi-somnambulant small town of roughly 8.000 inhabitants. Its proximity to Berlin has generated enough recent growth that a new high-school had to be built. The building’s structure is an ensemble constituted by classrooms as well as proliferate areas open to the sky; the latter actually comprise a pivotal part of the building’s school-life scenography. The open spaces are intertwined with the different ground levels of the building, creating an almost topographic relationship between the open and closed areas. Simultaneously, the landscape architecture mediates the surrounding moraine landscape and the inner spaces of the school. In a finely balanced hierarchy, the open spaces connect to the building at all different levels: On the roof, at ground floor, and below ground level. While clearly organized along a central axis, the system of open spaces is sequential, yet disrupted; it is constantly changing directions, and is more agglomerate than linear.

One passage through the building: A wide entrance and a foyer behind a glass wall. Beyond the glass wall is a wide hallway that opens on the right to the auditorium. Overhead, the auditorium’s windows look towards the deck on the building’s roof. To the left the auditorium space opens to the interior patio. At the end of the hallway axis is another door. One steps out and finds oneself on a bridge-like concrete pathway which is an extension of the axis and aims out into the landscape. To the left, a large open staircase leads down to the sports fields. As one turns around, the upper extension of the staircase leads onto the roof deck which is used during school-breaks. The deck offers a view into the Brandenburg landscape not unlike a classical garden terrace. However, here the main outlook feature is the sight of the colour game of the sport-fields at the bottom of the staircase. The staircase doubles as a stand overlooking the brightly green coloured sprint tracks which again reach out into the open landscape. When looking back from out there towards the building, one sees an inseparable ensemble of building and open space, the green opacity of the schools facade mixing with the elastomeric tartan green of the sprint-track turf.



7)

The garden is an ideal place. Since we had to leave paradise, the garden has been where we look for something better. The garden is about desire, about devising an ideal. The garden is a means of expression, a place of ideas. Are the landscape architects the people who provide ideas when they come up with the design for a site? What would Topotek 1’s idea be? Is there a central idea in their work? Regarding the world as a (mostly) urban garden, as a place to give shape to, Topotek 1 approaches each site with curiosity, care, attention – and a twist. Topotek 1 propagates no manifesto, no call for utopia, because they know that we no longer have one garden, but many, all of them different. However, there seems to be an underlying script to their work: a firm belief in contemporizing a place, linking it with the now by bridging time from the historical past to the future, bridging paradise with the gardens of today.



8)

Looking up from the foot of Hageberg Hill, the solitary building of the Mobile Life Campus looms amidst a sequence of lines. The hillside, thinly sliced into graphic lines, forms the shape of a tilted tray upon which the house is presented. The tray is comprised of series of terraces. However, unlike conventionally orthogonal, flat terraces, the earthen folds in Wolfsburg follow the overall lay of the hillside. The modulation of the ground follows the textile motif of weaving, a plying of the ground. As an idealised reminiscence of the former agrarian field, the terraces seem like the frozen image of the ridge of a plough. The surface of the terraces is covered with the light veil of an apple orchard; the fruitful garden serves as a promise. On approaching the building, the visitor walks up the gently sloping hillside: the series of terraces, shifts of earth, a folded surface, the folds flash a stone face at him. Looking back, downhill, like in a puzzle picture on a gigantic scale, he sees the stone terraces disappear, they concur into the image of one, green meadow. The relationship of building and campus is not unlike that of the renaissance villa and its garden, the closely knit ensemble at the edge of the city, fit into the agrarian landscape; a system in itself, looking out onto the productive lands. At Mobile Life Campus, situated at the edge of the automobile city, from here one looks from the hillside into the Aller Valley, towards the Mittelland Channel, the original transport vein of the industrial city. Beyond, the view features the flow of cars rushing into the city from the adjacent autobahn off-ramp at the foot of the hill; one looks onto an industrious urban agglomeration and onto the power station which is driving it in the distance. Prospects. Along the axis which leads to the building's main entrance the newest Volkswagen model quietly rolls up the hill.

9)

We grasp the world as a description, a story-line, an intricate map, a geography of ideals. Designing a site is describing it anew, re-signifying it. Every site is new, each one a different measure of depths of times. Designing is the retelling of stories, adjusting the focus while the film is running, restoring the plot. At their best, the stories take off on their own. At the same time, we do not reinvent the world by a tale; rather, we're adjusting minimally, reorganizing movement and time. As landscape architects, we know about the garden. It is about change, its design opens the veins of time. Gaining knowledge, we lost eternity. We now are holding time in our hands.