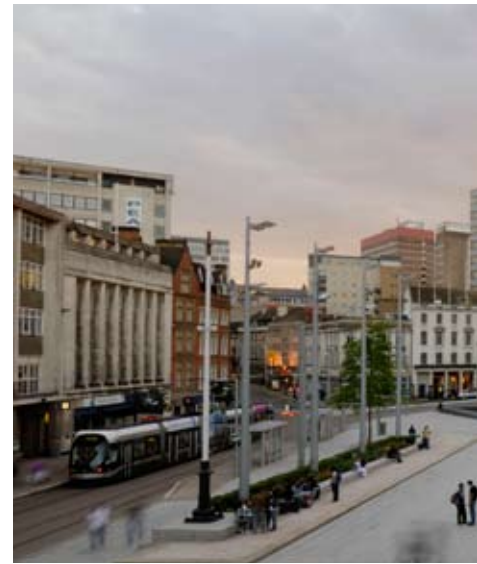


Abstract Romanticism European landscape architecture and the globalisation of nature by Christian Welzbacher

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Old market square, Nottingham, United Kingdom
Architect: Gustafson Porter. Completed: 2007
Photography: Dom Henry, James Newton (top);
Dominik Bueckers, Dirk Lellau (bottom)

Nothing beyond the human body is more heavily charged with meaning than nature. Its shapes and colours, its peculiar games and its puzzles are all part of our emotional make-up. Nature is a screen onto which desires and even myths are projected. We are very sensitive to interferences in nature, not so much out of environmental awareness, but because to humankind, nature is always a symbol. Our ancestors dedicated particular trees to their gods. Certain natural and artificial landscapes are treated as national treasures. Plants for instance, appear on banknotes and their praises are sung by poets. Idyllic spots provide the backdrops for fairytales and fables by which entire peoples identify themselves. By projecting onto it this way, humans have turned nature into a secondary cultural asset. It is part of the way humans think and live, part of their self-perception, although most often, 'nature' in this case is not exactly wilderness but a contrived, manmade landscape.

These facts are often repeated in discussions of the classic garden designs of the Renaissance, the Baroque period, or the 19th century. Looking at today's landscape architecture, they are all too easily forgotten. But does not 'designed nature' remain, above all, a quintessentially romantic affair? Zaha Hadid recently called for the Alps to be razed. This would certainly be possible. Perhaps it would even make sense. But we would never do it, as European history and sensibilities are too tightly wound up with the Alps. We may as well admit it: although we have conquered mountains and oceans, their myths live on as postcard motifs.

Genius loci

Let's start with two projects that anticipate current tendencies in European landscape architecture in exemplary fashion. First, the Schouwburgplein in Rotterdam, designed in 1990 by Adrian Geuze/West 8. Geuze planned the rectangular city square in the spirit of post-Modernism, which made 'context' and 'history' key factors in drawing up a design. The emphasis is on the urban 'genius loci'. At the same time, however, Geuze took his inspiration from the broader context of the artificial landscape that is still considered 'typically Dutch': flat land, divided by canals, patterned with a grid of fields, crowned by dead straight dikes, covered over by greenhouses. The Schouwburgplein can be read as an imploded national park in concrete, an absurd and certainly ironic idea which garnered



*Bohaterów Getta Square, Krakow, Poland
Architect: Lewicki & Latak. Completed: 2006
Photography: Pawel Kubisztal*

international recognition and whose design principles, both aesthetic and thematic, are still being repeated in many projects across Europe today.

My second example is Dominique Perrault's Bibliothèque de France, whose huge courtyard was transformed into an inaccessible forest to 'make the library a place outside time, whose references are universal.' Perrault revealed himself as a true romantic: 'Nature is not captured in a single glance, not contained in a single thought, a single emotion does not suffice. It is an ensemble of natures, from the most virgin to the most artificial, and far from excluding each other these natures enter into friction, due to their proximity or to their combination.' As well as outlining an understanding of 'nature' in general, this remark also described the architect's project: the 'forest' in the courtyard is answered by the wooden planking on the building's roof, over which visitors to the library must walk to reach the entrance. These planks are trees in a new state, an industrially processed 'forest', cultivated nature, subordinated to the abstract, intellectual grid of landscape architecture and architecture. In the Bibliothèque, 'untouched' and 'artificial' nature stand side by side.

Minimal art

Both of these projects are shaped by 'contextualism' and 'historicism'. But both also bear the mark of a second set of terms that are more important still in today's landscape architecture: 'minimalism' and 'abstraction'. Both are based on a dialog with sculpture and Land Art of the kind practised since the 1970s, especially by American artists such as James Turrell and Richard Serra. The spread of these concepts in current garden design is illustrated by two design motifs: the ramp and the monolithic sculpture.

The magnificent Federal Garden Show in Potsdam (2001) took place at a former Soviet tank firing range. The ruts, furrows and other signs of usage were highlighted to powerful effect by means of landscaping. The firm of B+B (Amsterdam) left an enormous old concrete ramp standing and echoed its crude bastion form in several places. Four years later, the next Federal Garden Show opened in Munich, designed this time by the French firm of Latitude Nord/Gilles Vexlard. Once again there were ramps, although the site at the former Riem Airport provided no direct reason for this. A feature motivated by the context

had become a self-referential form, one that features in a great many parks designed in recent years.

The ramp is not an isolated phenomenon. European landscape architecture has now adopted the entire repertoire of Land Art. And it is not overly critical to say that it uses this repertoire like a range of set pieces: concrete blocks, stone cages, small stands of birch trees, Cor-Ten steel walls, patches of gravel. This procedure has an odd effect when an abstract motif is 'coded' and charged with meaning in one context, only to appear elsewhere as pure form. Erratic blocks, familiar from the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, for example, appear in a cemetery (De Nieuwe Ooster in Amsterdam, designed by Karres en Brand and inaugurated in 1997) as monolithic basalt cubes along the central axis capable of housing urns and vases. A second aspect related to Peter Eisenman's memorial in Berlin is the way the path along the almost 100-metre-long columbarium wall, with its 727 burial niches, is designed as a labyrinth. At least here there is a distant link between the two projects, with their shared theme of 'commemoration'. But in most cases, there is not even a link of this kind. This is clearly shown by the work of the most renowned landscape architects realizing projects across the continent. DS (Amsterdam), Saurer & Weber (Solothurn), Stig L. Andersson (Copenhagen), Lützwow 7 (Berlin), Batlle i Roig (Barcelona), Cigler & Marani (Prague), Henghan and Peng (Dublin), Martha Schwartz (very successful in Europe, most recently with her redesigned City Square in Coventry): all of them work with the repertoire borrowed from Minimal Art, with or without reference to the context.

There is a motif from town planning that is quoted in a similar way: the use of axes that cut across and divide gardens. It first appeared extensively in Daniel Libeskind's exuberant early work, associated with themes such as 'reminding' and 'remembering'. The Franco-German firm of Agence Ter, on the other hand, cleverly adapted these elements to its gardens and created truly experiential tours. Ramps, concrete elements, sculptural monoliths and ground slabs pushed against each other – all this is characteristic of their brilliant designs, some of which feature tectonic shifts liable to seriously unsettle visitors. But these designs are not about 'historical memory'. Instead, they are concerned with creating green spaces for newly built residential and office properties, new places on green field sites, devoid of memory.



Riva Split Waterfront, Split, Croatia

Architect: 3LHD. Completed: 2007

Photography: Domagoj Blazevic Maasik

Ground level

Today, urban planning for the centres of European cities is firmly in the hands of minimalist landscape architecture. In the case of most city squares built in recent years, this comes in two-dimensional form, almost exclusively at ground level. In Krakow, for example, Lewicki & Latak carried out numerous interventions designed to freshen up the image of the city: stairs and steps, various types of paving for pavements and squares, several light elements. In places, as on Bohaterów Getta square in the area of the former Jewish quarter, these cautious interventions are then supplemented by sculptures. There is not a trace of green here, and even existing trees were removed so as not to disturb the lowly flatness of the 'Minimal Art'.

Similar means were used by the Zagreb firm of 3LHD in its renovation of the Riva in Split. Here, palm trees are slotted into a strict grid of cobblestones and benches to guide the movements of passers-by. Behind the promenade itself, where the traffic-calmed seafront road runs, large streetlamps were installed and all the cafés were given matching awnings. One could be forgiven for thinking that the idea was to Europeanize the Croatian coast by means of order and seriousness. And indeed, in one of Europe's 'capitals', the scene is very similar: Place des Nations in Geneva (2007, Fabrice Aubert) consists of a ground-level fountain installation divided by coloured squares. **Or the Old Market Square in the English city of Nottingham (Gustafson Porter, 2007): its centre is entirely empty, to keep it 'multifunctional'; at the edges, the occasional tree, in this case Japanese ginkgo; and finally, the obligatory fountain, an elongated block of polished granite with water flowing over it, set among a variety of different-coloured rectangular paving materials. Here, minimalism joins forces with pragmatism, so that the skaters who invade the city centre when the shops close will not be able to destroy anything.**

Crisis of meaning

It is probably no coincidence that art and architecture from memorial contexts have supplied the most productive models for current European landscape architecture. It may be due to their memorable forms, to the powerful impression they create within (urban) space, to their high aesthetic standards, maybe also to the

media coverage they receive. And in many cases, these forms undeniably remain imposing in their new landscape context. But there is no denying a conceptual dilution, an 'ennui' resulting from frequent reiteration and quotation without context. Blocks of granite and concrete, functioning here as a memorial, there as a climbing frame, elsewhere as a fountain, show the extreme interchangeability of the elements of today's landscape architecture. 'Landscaping' based on this model is thus abstract and artificial; it could be anywhere in the world. The set pieces involved are just as well suited to large-scale conversion projects (like the slagheaps of the Ruhr Valley) as they are to suburban parks and central city squares.

The development outlined here is the high point of an alarming trend. For it is quite obvious that interchangeability and arbitrariness are impacting negatively on the status of landscape architecture, as the entire discipline regresses into applied art. Green barriers 'tune' the gardens in front of our office parks, vacant lots are prettified, city centres rebuilt as event arenas – always using the same 'set piece' components. A fundamental revision of key issues is therefore overdue, since for an outsider, European landscape architecture now appears to be in the middle of a serious crisis of meaning. The main problem in this development is not so much the self-referentiality of the planners. Instead, the alarming effect lies in the way mannerisms alter our relationship to landscape in the long term: they lead to the loss of regional and national identities cultivated over centuries and viewed everywhere in Europe as an essential part of culture to be taken for granted.

Consequently, nothing could help today's landscape architecture more than a return to something that continues to shape human perception of landscape: Romanticism. Old themes would then regain prominence: ties to the place, the region, the nation, the culture and the natural setting within which a given new project is being planned. At the same time, it would also be vital to thoroughly rethink the use of artistic 'set pieces'. Nothing against ramps, concrete cubes or light columns in and of themselves; it is only their excessive use that leaves an unpleasant taste. Reducing such usage to a tolerable level could be assisted by connecting with the context, the genius loci. In addition, stable codes need to be found at last, though this is admittedly no easy task with any form of Minimal Art. Another point concerns the dialog between landscape architecture and neighbour-



Cemetery 'De Nieuwe Ooster', Amsterdam, Netherlands
 Architect: Karres & Brands. Completed: 2007



ing disciplines. What's needed here is a new sense of self-assurance, in order to get away at last from the role of the subordinate service provider or that of the 'artist' who 'decorates' architecture.

Different approach

So is this essay finally a conservative plea, longing for a return to romantic times before globalisation, when libraries were still transformed into forests and city squares into national parks? Not necessarily, as shown by these final two examples (the fact that they are both Italian is purely coincidental). Amidst the steep vineyards of the Tuscan village of Bargino, the Florentine firm of Archea Associati is currently building a spectacular cellar facility. The building digs its way into the mountainside in underground waves, extending the landscape inwards. From outside, all that is visible is layered concrete slabs and glass facades, leaving the winemaking site untouched. Respect for the place and ingenious elegance are the hallmarks of this project that offers the landscape a platform, a stage on which to present itself.

An entirely different approach was taken with the 'Strada de Vento', a huge area of the Southern Apennines that stretches over eighty kilometres. Here, the planners Daniel Moderini, Giovanni Alessandro Selano and Laura Zampieri worked with local authorities and investors to create a wind farm in the natural landscape of the region, with the aim of generating a 'new kind of cultivated landscape'. In order to meaningfully integrate the large, white turbines (long familiar in most parts of Europe as a disturbing alien presence) the architects scaled down the bizarre landscape of mountain ridges and recreated it as an undulating range of hills. In a free rhythm, the windmills stand on the protruding ribs and frame the sky. Out of the natural topography of the setting they have made an abstract, artificial 'landscape picture'. In 100 years perhaps it will have acquired iconic status, like many cultivated landscapes in Europe before it. This concept, which boldly addresses the realities of new energy sources, also opposes the yearnings that prevail, for example, in Austria. Ten years ago, at the suggestion of then-EU agriculture commissioner Franz Fischler, cows were first put out to graze in places where farmers were forbidden by central regulatory authorities to produce either milk or meat.

The cows, it was said, were so much part of the 'image' of the cultivated landscape, especially for tourists, that they were put back out into the meadows as set pieces, like ramps and Cor-Ten steel, but with a deeper, far more concrete meaning. In this instance, it was purely a matter of marketing.

To conclude, let us return to nature. Even more strongly than landscape architecture, nature itself has also been globalised – by humans. For some years now, black squirrels introduced from America have been romping their way across Europe. In Germany, the popular horse chestnut tree is gradually dying out due to infestation by moths from Asia. In Spitzbergen, Europe's northernmost point, a team of researchers has observed drastic changes in flora. These are due in part to global warming and the melting of the polar ice caps, but also to the fact that tourists coming to visit the tip of the continent bring seeds from their home countries with them, mostly hidden under the soles of their shoes. An Australian student by the name of Chris Ware has taken this problem in hand: during the summer months of 2008, he set up a stand in a corner of Longyearbyen Airport, Norway, offering all passengers 'free shoe cleaning'.

Actions of this kind are a sure sign that romantic ideals continue to exist, especially in places where globalisation is most tangible. In February 2008, a huge underground facility was inaugurated in Spitzbergen to house a gigantic seed bank. Not for the natural flora of the region, but for food plants. The Svalbard Global Seed Vault (Barlindhaug Consult, Tromsø) will store 1.5 million samples from plant strains bred by humans from around the world, including 70,000 types of rice and 15,000 types of bean. The project was co-financed by the American biotech giant Monsanto, one of the world's leading suppliers of genetically modified seeds. It will be interesting to see when and how European landscape architecture reacts to such challenges. <