

# *Landscapes etched with optimism*

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**NEW YORK** — Landscape architects have long felt sidelined or devalued by their architectural brethren. But as the boundaries between the two professions slowly dissolve, it seems that landscape designers are advancing some of the most potent visions of how blighted cities can be revived.

"Groundswell," an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, showcases the results of this gradual shift.

Spanning nearly two decades of contemporary landscape design, this wide-ranging show surveys 23 projects - from plazas to waterfront parks to large-scale urban renewal efforts. The picture that emerges is of one of the most fruitful periods in landscape design in a century or more, with visions that range from the hyper-real to the atavistic. (Minimalism makes an appearance, but when it does it seems like more of a warning than an inspiration.)

If the show has a subtext, in fact, it is a forthright desire to come to terms with the postindustrial landscape, in particular its legacy of violence and decay. Many of the projects seem to have been plucked from a list of man-made horrors: the site of a terrorist bombing, a war-torn city center, poisonous dumping grounds and industrial wastelands. The show's underlying optimism is rooted in the power of landscape design to act as a healing agent.

Yet one of the show's strengths is that it never preaches. Even the most toxic landscapes are envisioned as part of a broader cycle of decay and renewal. And all are explorations of communal memory - an attempt to openly engage that dark history rather than cover it over.

Of these, the most lyrical is the stunning Igualada Cemetery on the outskirts of Barcelona, which opened in 1996. (Adding to its resonance, it was one of the first important commissions for Enric Miralles, architect of the new Scottish Parliament, who died of a brain tumor at the age of 45 in 2000.) A drawn-out processional path carves down into the earth; tombs frame the path on either side, embedded in the cemetery's canted concrete retaining walls.

The aim is to draw you deeper into the realm of memory. But it is also about forgetting. Built in a decrepit industrial zone, the cemetery offers an escape from the relentless pace of modernization into a more intimate inner world. The asymmetrical arrangement of the paths is an antidote to the regimentation of a culture modeled on the assembly line.

The relationship between excavation and memory resurfaces in Gustafson Porter's "Garden of Forgiveness" in central Beirut, a district that was virtually obliterated during Lebanon's 16-year

civil war. The project, currently under construction, offers some of the show's most haunting images. The garden will rise amid ancient and medieval ruins that were uncovered during the restoration of the central district. A series of terraces steps down to the newly excavated site, which is divided by an old Roman road. The ancient foundations will frame smaller gardens within the park.

Like the cemetery in Barcelona, the project evokes a spiritual journey. The exposed ruins suggest the excavation of the city's shared memories; the gardens, healing. In both projects, the earth is imbued with sacred meaning.

That approach is in striking contrast to that of designers who fervently embrace the artificiality of our postindustrial world. Of these, the most innovative may be the Schouwburgplein (1996) in Rotterdam, a plaza by West 8 Urban Design & Landscape that draws inspiration from the eeriness of the city's industrial waterfront. The plaza's surface, raised slightly above the surrounding streets, is paved in a pattern of wood slats, perforated metal and heavy-duty rubber. A row of mechanical "light masts," inspired by the massive cranes along Rotterdam's piers, lines the project's northern edge, their muscular steel arms gliding up and down like oil pumps.

By raising the plaza just above street level, the designers enabled light to filter down into parking levels underneath the plaza - a further reminder that you are not on solid ground. But the plaza is also a stage for reflecting on Rotterdam's gritty history. Its industrial piers, modern housing blocks and generic shopping strips are emblematic of the postwar city.