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Readings from the “*In [and] Out*” of Sites for a Global and Dynamic Geomorphological Approach

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Abstract

The project for the urban Park of Chaudfontaine (Belgium) represents an experiential ground where we had the opportunity to conjugate change in different ways: physical, perceptual, environmental, cultural, historical, technical, infrastructural, popular, political, etc. The park, revealing itself as a common unit between landscape, city and public space, becomes a pilot area witnessing the experiential thickness that this type of green space reaches. Reading the park as a palimpsest (A. Corboz), where man has heavily intervened and where natural forces are continuously transforming the site, makes this fragment of territory the starting point for explaining a project methodology based on: *Observation*, linked to methods of the Italian geographer De Matteis; *Dynamic reading* of traces engraved on a site's soil (Derrida, Assunto, Muratori) or historical permanences; *Interpretive writing* that uses the interaction of all architectural (human action) and landscape's (natural action) signs, as indicated by the European Landscape Convention. From these three united main actions, derives a project approach that practices full interaction between City Planning, Urban Design and Landscape.

Keywords : *geomorphology, reading and writing, natural and human interaction, “artialisation”, landscape and urban design.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The changes that have always been linked to the development of the city are today more rapid than they have ever been. As a result the production of artefacts becomes more illegible and incomprehensible to the human communities that generate them. Thus, in Wallonia two perceptions have arisen: the existence of an “ugly country” as opposed to the “beautiful country”, which are protected by conservation, often leading to their “*museumification*”.

This paradox is accompanied by a loss of confidence in studies on the morphology of natural and urban sites. Indeed, once the history and the study of growth processes became obsolete, various phenomena related to the loss of connection with the structural reasons that create our living environment emerged.

At the same time, there has been a trend to respond to the fast production by speeding up choices and actions, by creating repeated breaks in project practices applied to cities and landscapes.

However, nowadays, despite a resurgence of modernity and thoughts of technicity, we are witnessing a renewed interest for the development of knowledge practices of all the processes governing the change of environments.

For that reason, the interest in “reading” cities and landscapes as organisms in continuous evolution is being rediscovered.

The transformation factor becomes thus a major element to take into account. This substantially calls into question the practices of design and requires the adoption of new approaches integrating temporality. As a consequence, dynamics and the continuously changing states of equilibrium of all humanised environments call for a far-reaching reconsideration of design methodologies

The experience of the project for the Hauster Park for the city of Chaudfontaine, in Belgium, has been a double testing ground. It allowed us, on the one hand, to read and integrate the changing of a place into the design process, and on the other hand, to question and raise awareness of human, political and cultural contexts, in which all ability to understand the richness of ordinary places was lost. The objective here is to present an approach respecting the site to be transformed and the multidisciplinary methods of composition. These methods are separated by professional cleavages, yet always linked by common environments to deal with: the city and the landscape.

Having regard to the phenomenon of "change" also warrants gathering different knowledge and practices, in order to support the evolution of artefacts - cities and landscapes - governed by the interaction of natural and human forces¹.

Cities and landscapes are present and evolve. How does the design adapt to it?

1. MATERIALS and METHODS

The basic question revolves around the design of a proposed "revitalisation" of a green space in the City of Chaudfontaine situated on the Vesdre, a part of the River Meuse basin in Belgium.

The place appears as an island bounded on its eastern side by a Vesdre meander and on its western side by a small artificial canal, dug in the eighteenth century to exploit the driving force of water, required for industries located there.

On this site, a manor residence, now a Spa, faced a lawn area where a few isolated trees and a small portion of natural wood intermingled, without being able to give this space its own identity. Appearing neither as a park nor as a garden, this land, floating between the river flows, has never possessed any other identity than the one conferred to it by hikers and inhabitants, who used to flock in.

The site suffered from a lack of recognition and, in the absence of collective history and experience, appeared as a land available for any kind of program.

The baseline of the project was:

- The site of intervention caused by the artificial island Hauser, characterised by a set of buildings and vegetation types likely referring to the pre-existence of a garden surrounded by the advancing of the wood. This green space, without a strong identity, is separated from the manor house which was originally part of the set.
- A mid-valley crossed by a river, the Vesdre River, flowing in many flood meanders through the city of Chaudfontaine and interrupted multiple times by infrastructures, the railway and the national road, repeatedly intersecting the valley.
- A program of a "Garden's Festival" for a "public land", comparable to an old "common" in London, transformed into a "park with fee", to operate as a new tourist resource;

The initial question focussed on a program of urban development to be staked on a vacant land, located in the valley. This place, considered only as a "void", was assigned no particular value: neither for the environment nor for the heritage.

¹ Ian McHarg, 1989, *Progettare con la Natura*, 2th, ed. Franco Muzzio, Padova , Trad. G. Mancuso , McHarg, 1969, *Design with Nature*, 1th, New York

The initial postulate of the project was to reverse the question's terms from a first fundamental change: showing that the site which was seen merely as an empty area or as a vacant lot to fill was instead a *palimpsest*², a site carrier of signs, stories and evidence visible and invisible. The fine observations of the permanent characters have offered the opportunity to establish a basis for systemic readings used as hypothesis to test in situ.

The examination of the identified elements and the various arrangement modes have been the first step to adopt a careful look worn on all the dynamics that formed the place over time.

The reading of historical changes of the place, the intentions of the succeeding projects and their influence on the geographical and compositional configurations of the site as a whole have achieved the "landscape reasons" who built the site over time. These have been put in a "*systemic connection*" with the natural forces that have always conditioned precarious stability of lands and are still threatened by increasing flood risks.

The project approach, incorporating these factors, was oriented towards movement acceptance as part of a distinctive, still ongoing, dynamic of the place. This dynamic is to be grasped and to be understood in order to generate "*new writings*" fit to interact with the forces and rhythms of the natural and human transformations continuously imposed on this place. Therefore the notion of palimpsest is needed, but it is not considered as a simple mechanical layering stabilised by time.

The palimpsest is interpreted as a complex writing or a text which by iteration of past actions, combined with those present on the territory, acquires a valuable thickness through incised materials that make this spongy area located by the Vesdre a significant place, worthy of attention and care.

The city and landscape, read as dynamic palimpsests, emerge characterised by thickness, made of overlapping, incisions and dependent interactions of multiple structures. These cannot be entered as elements to isolate and classify according to criteria that transform them into fixed reference models. An opposite way, as explained by André Corboz, states that these structures are multiple and varied, and with confused organization, must be supported precisely because of "*their difference and growing dissociation*" or "*by their telescoping*"³.

This great mobility of structures to read justifies the actual use of other representation modes that establish links between the palimpsest and the hypertext, certainly a more adapted metaphor to contemporary contexts.

This innovative logic based on the coexistence of moving parts is introduced into the process of the project:

- Firstly, through a more extensive and iterative in situ observation;
- Secondly, by a dynamic reading of current phenomena.

The observation is made in the manner suggested by the geographer Dematteis⁴ who sought to re-establish a return to exploratory planning methods of territories, in order to give geography the character of pacing art, hereby documenting the changes in the earth over time. This interpretation situates the action of observing at the centre of the discipline and rejects all forms of codification which freezes and stops movement. The temporal components and iterative exploration may still be the strengths of a discipline, that by choosing to present itself as a "science", has lost the potential of an area dedicated to chronicling the living world. A world that is moving and still in progress.

The thickness of the in situ observation allows to rediscover the possibility of approaching the landscape and the city as realities, themselves moving. For that, exploratory reading practices which

² André Corboz, 2001, *Le territoire comme palimpseste et autres essais*, ed. L'Imprimeur, Besançon.

³ Ibidem pp.13-15

⁴ Giuseppe Dematteis, 1985, *Le metafore della terra. La geografia umana tra mito e scienza*, ed. Feltrinelli, Milano

incorporate changes among the elements in the understanding territory game enrich this process: artefacts to be read by contemporary means as contemporary real un-simplified configurations.

The project, enriched by these practices, proceeds according to a refined method by taking into account the unfrozen dialectical reading system configurations, from which we must be able to manage the various phases of possible equilibrium.

Combinatorial games suggested by the practices of deconstruction of the text, peculiar to Jacques Derrida⁵, are another source of methodological reflection transposed in this case study. Elements leaving traces on the landscape of the Chaudfontaine valley, first separated and then recombined in different results, were the basis for construction of new forms of combinations of existing words. This work led to nest scales, considering both the detail and the whole. In other words, regard at the same time the island and the valley, the river and the infrastructure, islands and ribbons etc.

This combinatorial game, by seeking to understand the different possible interactions and the multiple levels of influence between systems, has provided the opportunity to re-establish the Hauster Island at the centre of the native landscape's systems formed by an old meander of Vesdre River and intersected by man in order to exploit the strength of its waters.

Read as a natural site and as a man-made artefact, the island's ambivalence gave the possibility to trace back to relationships' games, to maintain with other active components in the system of the landscape:

- the national road and the river water;
- the railways combined with waterways and roads;
- multiple cut lands and the linearity of infrastructure.

What was presented at the beginning of the project approach as a trivial field to be appreciated/valorised only by providing external programming, has suddenly emerged as a rich medium with many faces, identities, materials and appropriations.

The island of Hauster has regained the status of a living place where reading the different ongoing dynamics has brought up values hitherto unreadable, ignored or forgotten.

If we start from the reading of the principle enunciated by Derrida of "*trace-écart (gap)*" the landscape that includes Hauster Park can be apprehended in two ways. As an artefact "traced and punctuated», on the one hand, by marks built and unbuilt internal (traces), and on the other hand, as one of the many islands created by man, floating in the fragmentary river landscape.

In terms of the detail we have found different planting systems that bestow upon it the image of a park while simultaneously transforming it into a fragment of the great landscape.

At the scale of the valley we found a tight dialectic maintained between the river and the slopes, but also with new spaces and fragments created by the effect of "overlay" infrastructure undulating and intertwining in the space fluctuation of water in the valley. Thanks to synchronic readings of phenomena on a large and on a small scale, we can rediscover the complex morphological relations established and maintained between natural and artificial elements. Taking into account these thick, three-dimensional and hypertextual interrelations provides us with an opportunity to pave other tracks for morphological and programmatic reconstruction.

This approach allows the smallest part of a system to become the elementary unit of balance to reach with the *coaction* of each element of the set, just like an organism. The result is a project that shows the park as tesserae of the urban and the landscape mosaic which can evolve over time.

In this way:

- It is both an artificial island and a former meander.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, 1972, *La dissémination*. éd. du Seuil

- It participates in the composition of the system of green spaces in the valley bottom, in which it plays the role of a bridge between existing environments.
- It is a landscape unit characterizing one spatial sequences specific linear development of the river.
- It is a fragment of a landscape carved by the global river.
- It is at the same time fragment and all.
- It is a garden or defined space and it is also the representation of a world that can be called "finite open", in the meaning of Rosario ASSUNTO, in his effort to rehabilitate the contemporary landscape in a new chain of signifiers suited to the condition of modernity.

2. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Contrary to the other projects, the underlying work deals with a place which has been designed and planned as a "*medium* for its nature and its large surface area". It is a "*layer interposed between the past and the future*" (Rosario Assunto) in the sense of a body on which it is possible to have new writings superimposed on the previous one, by assuring to keep the signs of the past and to reutilize them for new hypothetical configurations.

Research of writings' diversity and the interest in cultures, intentions and viewpoints, having already influenced the site, gives another dimension to the project: an open work which offers the listening, without forgetting "to speak" to the inhabitants, to the various users and the developers acting in and on the place. The decision-makers, administrators and economic actors may also be included in this action which has consequences on the present with multi-temporal objectives and explains the past to understand, federate and better prepare the future.

The main results achieved by the project are as follows:

- The reflection and the intervention based on the design operating by systems.
- The understanding of the trans-scalar systemic: principles of "Russian dolls" or fitting of scales.
- The awareness-raising of a diversified public: inhabitants and administrators, carriers of interventions articulate in co-relation with the introduced approach.
- The adoption of an approach focusing on research of articulations and continuities in lieu of an approach consisting of cutting.
- The design open to participation, to spatial recycling and to temporal continuity.
- The re-launching of the methods of (teaching) reading and the project, operating through the notions for "*engagement and distance*" (Gunther Vogt)⁶ or of "track-distance" (Jacques Derrida).
- The update of the morphological methods of reading/writing as lever of more profound knowledge (*engagement*) favoring the renewal of the action (D.A. Schön).⁷

The main contributions of this experience concern the rediscovery of the historic and economic factors as drawings (and intentions) motor of the territory, the urban dispersal and the fragmentation of the landscapes.

The knowledge of steps for a site's formation, acquired through the reading of old maps the representations of which conveyed minutely the geo-morphological characters, was used to explain, with the drawing and the text:

- How muddy lands, located at the foot of a hillside and extending up to the opposite rock face, eaten away by the river, become, under the cutting action of an artificial channel, swampy surfaces surrounded with water as an island.

⁶ Alice Foxley, 2010, *Distance & engagement. Walking, thinking and making landscape. Vogt landscape architects*, Lars Müller Publishers, Baden, Switzerland

⁷ Donald A. Schön, 2011, *The Reflexive Practitioner: how professionals think in action*, 11th ed. Ashgate

- Why and for what purpose, a technical operation of systematic cut of meanders formed by the river uses these new places formed in all the valley to settle industries there using the driving strength.
- The strength of the system of islands and linear ribbons (river, channel or the “*coup d’eau*” and infrastructures) which transforms the totality of the landscape.

Other stages of transformation confronted with this diffuse “*artialisation*”⁸ which extends throughout the valley, offer the opportunity to read the territory as a narrative in which every period provides a glimpse of how the changes at the same time create new spatiality and fade the others.

The use of these successive phases gives rise to a reading which allows to take into consideration both the elementary basic unit and the global nature of the existing configurations. The Hauster Park, treated then as a “*tesselle*” of a landscaped and urban system, becomes an element which lends itself to the sets of the fittings of scales. It can be a “*unit*” at the same time as a “*knot of entrance*” of all the green thorough spaces of valley. It becomes a landscaped carrier unit of the multiple spatial properties: either connected to the internal qualities, or to the external relations which the island of Hauster successfully fosters with the others, participating in the balance of the big landscape of the river.

So, the park carries in itself the values of both systems (internal and external) and can be considered a real unit of landscaped synthesis: a place holding the qualities of the one and the other one. The capacity to point to the one as well as to the other is the main stake to be reached by way of researching the morphological dynamics which characterise it.

Indeed, the reading, by crossing historical data and reconstructions of geographical and technological transformation process of places, allows us to understand to what extent it could be erroneous to pursue the only objective set by a local programming unconscious of the stakes a large scale would entail.

In this way, in the Municipality of Chaudfontaine, all unused or forgotten “waste” or “cuts” spaces were spotted. These separate lands were grouped to be reconsidered as the elementary parts of an upper system. Thus, the project of the Park has become a starting point for two core elements: an operation of careful revision of the urban fabrics of the valley and for the establishment of a sustainable system of green spaces and city parks.

The project may impose itself not as a product, but as a route, a path to be followed so as to put in relation parts of an organism which stopped assuming their initial roles.

The project, as new writing, established on the observation and the dynamic reading, proved to be a means to look for and rediscover new forms of syntaxes, capable of restoring sense and give a fresh impetus to materials hitherto present in scattered orders on the territory.

In the same way, surfaces constituting the basic unity of the island of Hauster, were studied to place special emphasis on: inscriptions on the ground, depressions, movement of lands, uprisings and slopes, physical and visual continuities, textures and earth's grains, as well as all of the organised or spontaneous vegetable typologies, light and shadows, green belts, boundaries or long views, centrings of skies, points of view, etc.

These components in situ were associated with all the factors accentuating the temporary changes, such as the wind, the sound, the water, variations of colours, textures and roughness or hardness of the materials. We associated to these sensitive transformations of the ordinary sites all changes provoked by the rhythms of the seasons, by day and night as well as by the multiple ways to use or appropriate the park, i.e. hiking, biking, playing, sport, resting or by mere contemplation.

⁸Alain Roger, 1997, *Court traité du paysage*, ed. Gallimard

3. CONCLUSION

The invitation to mingle the disciplinary looks around the theme of the transformations of cities and landscapes was the opportunity to present research by the project through a

METHODOLOGICAL NARRATIVE

of the fluctuations and the uncertainties of the project of the future of the "*Piece of waste ground & urban Park*" in Hauster in the face of " natural and human hazards " which threaten it.

The project was developed, the case of the Park being the foundation, as an approach which can accomplish various missions, overtaking the formal solution of a particular moment. By adapting itself to the character of an "*ongoing process*" of the built and unbuilt environment, we laid bare all open and unexpected practices: the project as " medium ", a major character corresponding to the capacity on the one hand, to be situated "between" elements and on the other hand, to combine «One *with* the Other" in opposition to "One *or* the Other".

We find the potential to unify again the built and not built by developing practices which "*observe, register and reveal*". This gives us the opportunity to appeal to the project as a tool to call things into question, to prepare. A tool which is situated "upstream" and accompanies the decision-making, by pushing production, activity and saturation into the background. And, also, by striving for the reuse, the reinterpretation, the reintegration, the recycling and the re-launching.

The case of the Park Hauster proves that the "originality of the approach and the success of the project, must not be looked for in the constructive finalisation, but in the "support ", that is, in the multiple "frames of interventions by the project ".

These appear as scenarios progressively altering the reality or as sequences of pre-projects which can be followed and possibly corrected in the course of time.

This notion of accompaniment or writing in progress to be supported or to be held under control is the major result obtained by this project.

The argumentation of the project, its numerous historical, *geo-morphological*, geographical, sociological, philosophic, botanical and other narratives, constitute as much "landscaped frames" as the subjectivities and interrelations. Whereas the former are composed in order to "grasp" the characters of the places, the latter impregnate sites with landscaped and urban quality values comparable to the park of Chaufontaine and the valley of Vesdre.

These graphic or textual frames, voluntarily maintained in their multiplicity, become the keys of greater importance to renew the methods and the usual instruments regarding Urban Project and Landscape.

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