What Should We Expect from the Production of Contemporary Landscapes?

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- 1 At the end of the 20th century, urban sprawl and de-industrialization had given rise to kinds of spaces that challenged our understanding of landscape. Urbanization, which had, and has, not been staunched, conveys its cargo of questions, and the issue of city and landscape is enjoying an undeniably topical revival.
- 2 The acknowledgement that landscape will vanish, eaten away by hegemonically inclined urban growth, is commonly shared. How are we to regard the space of major metropolises as well as of conurbations and other multipolar formations which nowadays structure our territories? Over and above well-worn epithets and terms—like discontinuous, and fragmentary, and chaotic organization—Pieter Versteegh, in *Méandres*, finds it challenging to describe the city as “an urban landscape”. The aim of this multi-authored book is to organize a line of thinking about contemporary landscape, starting out from different directions, but articulating them around a central hypothesis, the need for a conceptual reversal: no longer based on models making it possible to describe urban production, but

on the reality of contemporary production, combining a complex of urban fabric and moving landscape fragments. This reversal cannot turn a blind eye to the persistence—in the collective unconscious—of the obsolete model of monocentral organization: the city as *heuristic central density/ suburban periphery/ peri-urban countryside*. This kind of cultural inertia nurtures nostalgia for the historic city and the idyllic countryside. We can accordingly understand why, faced with the way construction tramples on land, the author promotes *renaturation* strategies—advancing or returning to what remains in terms of the *natural*, be it farmland or rural land. In his book, it is at least legitimate to submit such strategies to discussion. Various avenues are put forward to apply the basic conceptual reversal, the most persuasive avenue probably being putting the reversed territory, as proposed by Elena Cogato Lanza, into historical perspective.

- 3 In *Paysage et ornement*, Anne Léon-Miehe defends the idea that, caught as it is between fiction and description, the landscape is above all produced by language, thus challenging the relation to painting as the very principle of landscape. This relationship was championed by early ground-breaking theoretical studies, be it works on the origin of the word *landscape* or the many analyses of *hypotyposis* and *ekphrasis*. Sight, then, is no more a special sense than the picture is what constitutes landscape, and it is indeed all the senses that are at work when it comes to composing a landscape. This very current avenue is cleverly explored here in the literary arena. In associating the comprehension of landscape with an understanding of ornament, the contributors to this demanding, at times abrupt, but invariably stimulating volume, edited by Didier Laroque and Baldine Saint Girons, pool their efforts to prolong and renew the thinking that marked the 1990s, which, in France, had tried to lay theoretical foundations for multidisciplinary thinking about landscape.
- 4 In *Paysages contemporains*, M. Spens lists the recent works of recognized landscape artists from different generations such as Bernard Lassus, Lawrence Halprin, Martha Swartz, Jacqueline Osty and Toru Mitani. In addition to parks, landscaped gardens and landscaped architectural works, a whole section of the book is devoted to urban works. In this section, the author emphasizes the topicality of the idea of interstitial spaces in our cities (at the crossroads of different urban grids), which offer a chance to produce identity-generating works for our contemporary cityscapes. The projects presented illustrate a selection. The problem-set involving the urban landscape or cityscape was discussed and theorized over by *The Architectural Review* and in particular by Gordon Cullen throughout the 1950s. From that rich and complex debate, Spens takes the theoretical contribution made by Collin Rowe about the notion of “accident”, and he laments the dearth of opportunity offered to Cullen to put his “serial vision” and the methodological tools issuing therefrom to the test. He mentions the input from 1980s’ practitioners, who recognized the role of the mineral and vegetable landscape in the urban work, helping to renew its foundations. The same applies to the part played by bridges, those infrastructural phenomena whose aesthetic dimension and urban function are nowadays fully assumed.
- 5 The remarkably restrained book by Marc Desportes is devoted to the history of transport infrastructures. He dovetails technological history, cultural history and landscape theory, and invites readers not to regard high-tech developments, such as bridges with exceptionally long spans, as isolated artefacts existing in an abstract space. Conversely, he questions the space in which technical structures are incorporated, exploring the spatial representations of their designers and users alike. It thus turns out that the

behavioural patterns of users are such as to alter the actual perception of the spatial framework of infrastructures, and transport infrastructures in particular. His hypothesis is that a form of transport dictates ways of acting, feeling and finding your bearings, for travellers. Each major transport technology hides a “landscape”, inasmuch as it forms an approach to the space crossed, as is shown by 18th century road landscaping studies, 19th century railway landscaping studies, studies of the first cars, and motorways in the 20th century, and landscape as seen from aircraft. This is how “landscapes of technology” are defined, hallmarked as they are by ways of looking at things that are prompted by infrastructures. The repercussions of forms of transport are seen in a broadened frame, incorporating the various aspects of innovation, interacting with society as a whole. A similar methodical gesture—at once evident and effective—runs through the book, which grasps new ways of looking at space, new points of reference, and new interests which are emerging to form a *landscape*. The reference to the traveller’s experience is based on a diverse range of printed sources and documents, both visual and audiovisual. The goal is invariably to reconstruct space as perceived by contemporaries.

- 6 These four books share in common the fact that they question and challenge landscape from the viewpoint of its production: in them, both intellectual and cultural constructions and forms of professional praxis are questioned.