Operative landscapes

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Operative Landscapes

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The concept of transformation lends itself much easier to landscape than to architecture. The idea of transformation – to take something existing and to work it into something else – describes exactly the constituting process for the production of landscape. Hence it is difficult to think of landscape as having a beginning and an end. It appears as if it had been and would be around forever. And this ongoing process of (self)transformation defines landscape much more than all its material substance.

Not so architecture. Despite all efforts the discipline has made to step out of the realm of objecthood, the constitution of architecture still seems to lie in this atavistic act of putting an object on a given territory. The character of this act is not transformative but additive: you add something new to something existing, rather than working on the existing itself.
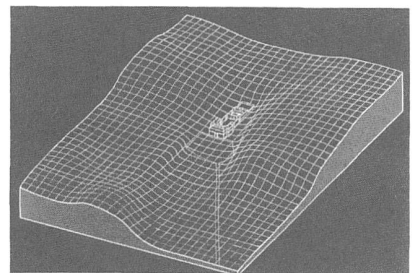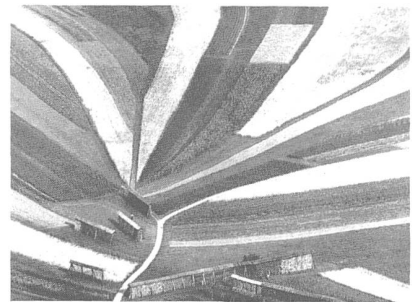
Landscape resists this logic of accumulation because it is not based on this dialectical relationship of figure and ground. There is no new figure to be put on an existing ground. Whatever new may develop in a landscape – a hill, a forest or a lake – and however different it may appear from its surrounding, it will inevitably become part of the whole. However singular a new injection might be, it will never keep itself from being instantly assimilated by the collective pattern. The figure does not stay a figure, but converges with the ground to constitute a ground-figure. The landscape establishes and maintains its own coherence.
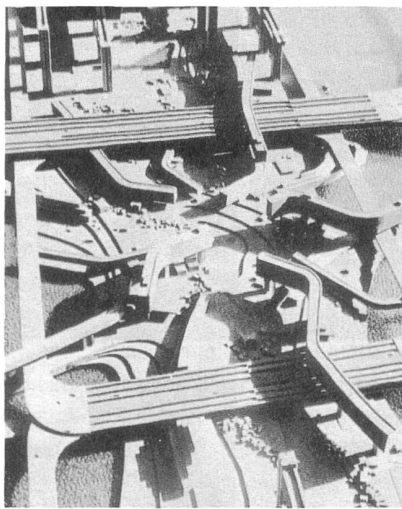
Exhaustion of Collage

This cohesive capacity of landscape has become increasingly attractive to architecture in recent years. In his seminal essay "Towards a New Architecture", Jeff Kipnis states that Collage had been the most effective grafting model for both Post-Modernism and Deconstructivism to oppose the modernist logics of tabula rasa[1]. But for Kipnis, the two decades of this practice indicate that "collage is not able to sustain the heterorgeneity architecture aspires to achieve". And he concludes:

"Collage is an extensive practice wholly dependent on effecting incoherent contradictions within and against a dominating frame. As it becomes the prevailing institutional practice, it loses both its contradictory force and its affirmative incoherence (...) The exhaustion of collage derives from the conclusion that the desire to engender a broadly empowering political space in respect of diversity and difference cannot be accomplished by a detailed cataloguing and specific enfranchisement of each of the species of differentiation that operate within a space."
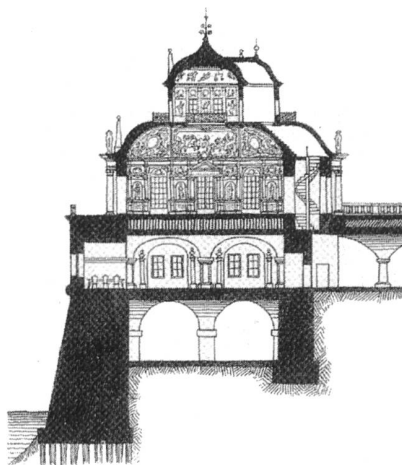
In other words, what collage fails to achieve is to put the heterogeneous elements it opposes in productive relationships. Kipnis therefore calls for a "cohesive heterogeneity engendered out of an intensive coherence in the elements themselves" as opposed to "out of extensive incoherence and contradiction".

Why is urbanism so rarely done in three dimensions?

Void space and connectivity

Kipnis' argument is basically directed to architecture. However, it can easily be related to the question of the contemporary city. If collage as a conflictuous negotiation of heterogeneity is exhausted, then clearly the urban paradigm based on this premise needs to be questioned as well. If collage on an urban level can, in the best case, generate systems of highly heterogeneous elements, it usually fails to effect the relationships between these elements.
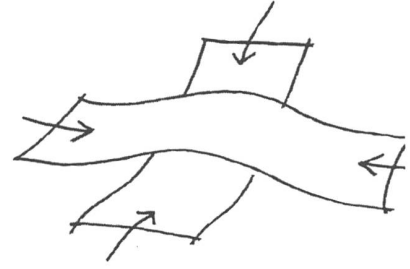
"Cohesive heterogeneity" seems to provide a possibility to reintroduce continuity as a performative[2] (but not formal nor representative) quality into the production of urban space today. In the medieval city, this continuity was produced by the built city fabric itself. Today, this is no longer the case. The city today is an accumulation of objects scattered around in a discontinuous space. Hence these objects are not capable of weaving a fabric. It is no longer the solid which generates continuity, but the void.

This reinversement is a key element in the development of modern urban design. (It may already be seen at work in the master plan of Rome by Sixtus V. and it is undoubtedly the explicit precondition of Haussmann's design scheme for Paris). Modernist urban design itself has incessantly emphasized the role of void space [3], however without assigning a performative function to it. This lack of definition seems to be one of the reasons for the deadness of the void spaces in Le Corbusier's "Ville nouvelle": underprogrammed and oversized, they disconnect the elements of the grid und interrupt their continuity. However, the question under which conditions the void becomes cohesive remains still unanswered.

Landscape as an agent for cohesive heterogeneity in the city

In its quest for continuity and connectivity, architecture could find a lot of inspiration in the generative logic of landscape. Due to its unbound extension both in space and time, the spatial activity of landscape is not so much about defining places themselves (as in architecture) but in the organization of their connections. Thus landscape continuity could provide the cohesion between the heterogeneous elements of the city.

One of the visionaries of this new role of the landscape for the city was the french landscape designer Yves Brunier who had worked on major large scale urban projects together with Jean Nouvel and Rem Koolhaas. Horrified by the decorative use of landscape common in the 1980s, Brunier began to exploit the performative potential of landscape . Brunier is credited by Rem Koolhaas as having confirmed finally his looming awareness "that landscape was in the process of becoming the only medium capable of establishing connections in the city". [4]

A series of elevated highways form a circulation infrastructure which seems to hover freely in space. Double-curved slabs of buildings placed both above and below are connected to the huge public plaza on the ground level. All the different systems (habitation, traffic, outdoor) are merged into one operational landscape.

Grounded on the fortificaton walls, the building is a hybrid of civil architecture and military infrastructure: basement and first floor are implanted in the belly of the thick wall construction, whereas only the vaulted main room reaches out and is actually formally articulated as architecture.

If landscape is to act out this quality, it has to be stripped of everything which alludes to romantic reminiscence of nature. Since we no longer find that idealized nature Rousseau wanted to return to, the picturesque attributes of 19th century landscape design today have become irrelevant. Once landscape is liberated from the burden of representation, it can start to unfold its performative qualities.

Infrastructure and Landscape

What makes infrastructure interesting in this context to architecture is its fluidness. Infrastructure provides a continuous network of connecting lines which generate to a large extent the urban layout. In a way, infrastructure is a kind of technical landscape of the city. However, if this infrastructural space is highly connective within its own system, it tends to work extremely disconnective when conceived independently from the city, as for instance in the model of the "Automobile City" (Autogerechte Stadt).

To bring out its connective potential, infrastructure therefore has to be landscaped as an urban space. Or in other words, for the landscape to inhabit the void, it has to incorporate infrastructure. So far a purely technical space, it has to be made accessible for the event of the city to be continued in here as well.

This intricate involvement of architecture and infrastructure is eventually producing a new artificial topology. Its physical appearance might not resemble a landscape as we know it, but it borrows from it the capacity to bind in systems of highly different kinds and forces.

Its physical form is completely undetermined and fairly unimportant as long as it works like an operative landscape. This is to say, rather than introducing just another element, it has to act as the glue between the elements already found in a given situation. It is the "go-between", and not so much another player in the game. But by doing so, it thoroughly changes the operational logics of both architecture and infrastructure: it landscapes their relationships.

Architecture and the operative logic of Landscape

If architecture is conceived more according to the processual logic of landscape transformation, then it can no longer revolve around the injection of an object in a field but operates like a field itself: one generates the links, sets the conditions and the form will be a resultant, not an a priori like in a simple compositional exercise.

It becomes the task of the architect to organize the field and not to predetermine how it will look like and how it will be used. The fit between space (form) and use (program) is loose and subject to change. It is time to drop the illusion of being able to anticipate the long-term use of a
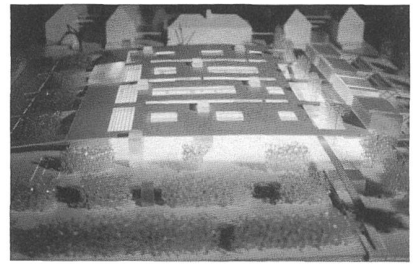

The Potsdam University Project encopasses 20000 square meters of laboratories, seminar rooms, libraries, cafeterias, auditoriums, mechanical rooms together with parking for 300 cars. These divergent uses are all bound together under a gentle overriding landscape gesture: a low, broad vault which originates in the street edge and rises up about 7 m before returning back to the street edge.
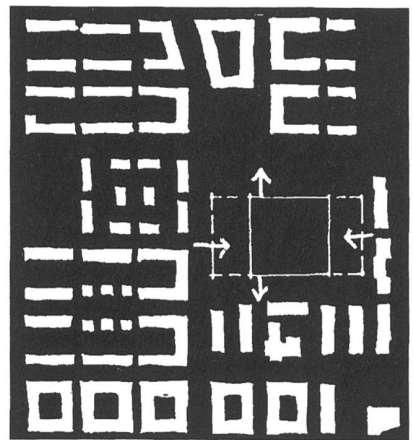
The overriding vault gesture creates a habitable field which becomes usable through a pattern of alleys and courtyards. The rooms along the alleys are lit by courtyards sized to provide the type of lighting and ventilation required by each use. Higher rooms such as libraries, cafeterias and auditoriums pierce through the vault as needed and thus become directly accessible from the outside. The loose fit between the overriding gesture and the local decisions creates a condition of continuous heterogeneity, in which single qualities remain recognizable within a whole.

Both the roof level (+7m) and the ground level
(-1,40m) begin and end together at the street edge. At
any one point in the Section, one may access the
Building either from the roof (a grassy field) or the
lowest level (street- and alley network).
Two groundplanes coexist simultaneously.
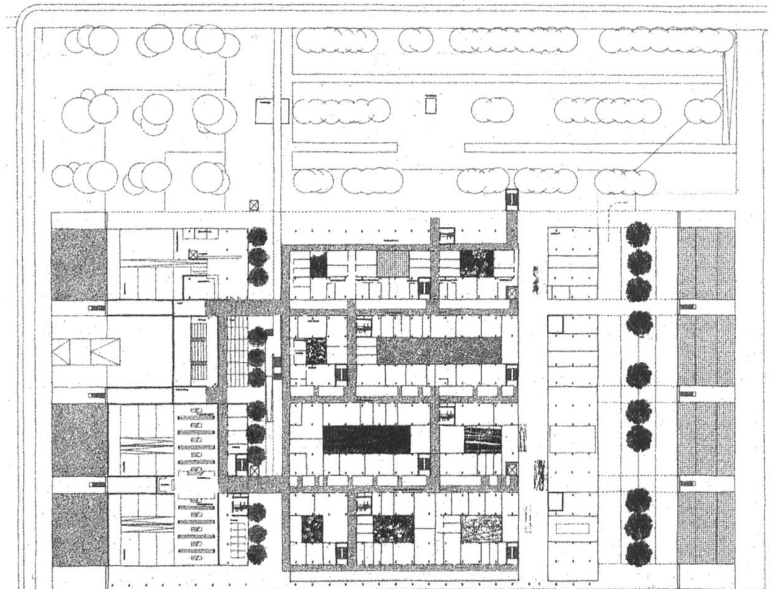
Quotations:

1 Jeff Kipnis: Towards a New Architecture. In:
Architectural Design, Profile No 102 (= Folding in
Architecture), 1993, pp. 40-50.
2 The term "performative" is used here in the way
Wittgenstein redefines the notion of "meaning" in
language. In his "Philosophical Investigations",
Wittgenstein rejects the representative definition of
language which sees the "essence" of language in a
pointing relationship of a certain word to a cor-
respondant object. For Wittgenstein, the meaning of
language is its usage.
3 One should not forget, however, that this void is not
empty but tightly controlled by infrastructural para-
meters. Among these, rail and parking networks, but
also the legal infrastructure governing land use policy
and density. This infrastructure space results from
technical urban requirements and is at first indifferent
to spatial qualities.
4 Michel Jacques (Ed.): Yves Brunier: Landscape
Architect. Basel, Boston, Berlin: Birkhäuser, 1996

Illustrations and Legends:

1 Houses in Isfahan, Iran. (Photograph by Myron B.
Smith)
Source: Bernard Rudofsky: Architecture without
Architects. A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed
Architecture. New York, 1964
2 Fan. 1995. Photograph by Janez Marencic. 1955
Source: Janez Marencic: Retrospective Exhibition of
Photographs. (Exhibition Catalogue) Moderna
Galerija Ljubljana, 1993
3 Guilio Romano: Villa Guilia. Rome.
Geomorphological Axonometrics
Source: Clemens Steenbergen/Wouter Reh:
Architecture and Landscape. The Design Experiment
of the Great European Gardens and Landscapes.
München, 1996
4 Kenzo Tange: Tokyo Bay Project.
Source: Fumihiko Maki: Investigations in collective
Form. St. Louis, 1964
5 G. M. Nosseni: Lusthaus auf der Jungfernbastei.
Dresden. Around 1700.
Source: Fritz Löffler: Das Alte Dresden. Geschichte
seiner Bauten. Leipzig: E. A. Seemann, 1981.
6 Double Wave concept figure for Potsdam
Fachhochschule Project
7 View of the Potsdam Fachhochschule Project
Source: photographs by the authors
8 Context with planned Perimeter Block Scheme
9 Roof Plan Potsdam Fachhochschule Project

Project Credits for Fachhochschule Potsdam
Competition 1997:
Pablo Molestina/Andreas Ruby with Angelika von
Olberg, Antje Möller, Andreas Schlichting, Verana
Kluth, Michael Kraus, Thomas Fenner

building. But this is no constraint. It gives architecture the opportunity to
concern itself with the making of generic habitable environments which
can accomodate, but do not presuppose, future uses. In this respect,
architecture abandons the compositional realm and joins the ranks of
society's infrastructural agents.

If architecture breaks with the figure/ground-distinction, it equally does
away with the opposition between inside and outside – it is both at the
same time. Outside space qualities are woven like a fabric through the
whole project. The romantic distinction between mass and void and the
attendant effort to bridge it – a recurrent design theme in modern architec-
tural design from Friedrich Schinkel to Frank Gehry – becomes eradi-
cated. The Beaux-Arts Poché as a dialectical prerequisite for space
building is obsolete, architecture becomes at once spatial and poché.

Another idea introduced from landscape to architecture is the relativity of
the ground level. Landscape has no absolute ground level. Its surface of
reference is not fixed neither plane by definition, but relative to forces
operating upon it over time (for example the water level change of the sea
induced by the tides, or the changing surface of a sand dune). This
modulation of the territory displaces the concept of the ground as the
material precondition of any architectural act. The ground ceases to be a
plane rolled out in two dimensions to become a fully three-dimensional
space. It lends itself to architecture as a space below the ground level.
However, it is not an underground space. The simple opposition of above
and below is multiplied to a spatial condition which may incorporate a
manifold of aboves and belows. The foundations, once a firm pedestal
below the building, turns into its "flowdations" where the issue of above
and below needs to be negotiated a new.