

# Consider landscape : compose de-compose re-compose

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# CONSIDER LANDSCAPE COMPOSE DE-COMPOSE RE-COMPOSE Christophe Girot

**Can we invent new rules of landscape figuration capable of integrating ecology within a broader topology of cultural signifiers? Landscape architecture is rooted in ancient values that are specific and essential to a transcendent understanding of nature. A landscape should not only be beautiful and specific to the culture and beliefs of each place; it should also tap from the extraordinary mix of compositional traditions that we have somehow left behind...**

## CONSIDER

Considering landscape is essentially about the production of meaning and beauty in our environment, composition is the hidden rule, structure and figuration of what we sense and encompass as we design. In other words, trees have never spoken to each other, but we have, over centuries, established a meaningful dialogue between them in the form of a landscape topology, producing spatial constructs in varied figurative combinations, call it composition if you like. The Occidental tradition has framed an external perceptual trajectory upon the landscape, called perspective. It creates, for the viewer standing outside the picture plane, an illusion of depth following a single line of sight, and it generates a specific form of spatial aesthetics and composition based on a fixed cone of vision. The Oriental tradition, on the other hand, has cultivated a more substantive perception of nature from within. Over millennia, it created a subtle balance between cosmic forces and elemental composition, using air, water, stone and vegetation to constitute meaningful sym-

bolic beauty in landscape. The fundamental difference in approach between these two separate traditions of landscape figuration was never reconciled, nor was it ever fully understood by opposite parties. Even our picturesque tradition, as natural as it may seem, relies heavily on a perspective framework to prop up meaningful symbolic assemblages. The celebrated pastoral landscapes of Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain that served as picturesque models were rigorously composed according to precepts of one-point and two-point perspectives. Today, however, established figurative differences between Occidental projection and Oriental introspection in landscape design have become far less perceptible, as if the inherent substance specific to these distinct cultural traits had become brittle, confused, not to say decomposed. By looking beyond this cultural devolution, are we now able to suggest possible steps towards a re-composition of landscape? The problem today is more a question of belief in the very purpose of landscape aesthetics and composition, than the result of a material incapacity to do so. It could well be that such a renewed interest in composition may require the merging of both Occidental and Oriental landscape sensibilities. This ambitious task raises a question of primordial importance: what could explain, worldwide, the complete abandonment of the principle of beauty in landscape composition over past decades? Has landscape beauty become such an enigma to us that we are unable to formulate it anew?

## COMPOSE

When did landscape figuration first occur, and for what reasons? The Occidental tradition developed out of two archetypes closely linked to given environmental conditions. Originally, it replicated sedentary patterns and rituals linked to proto agriculture, grazing, communal gatherings and religion. This led to the creation of specific figures of landscape, where the origins of the walled garden and the forest clearing appeared as a practical response to immediate needs for dwelling and sedentary necessities. The same compositional rules were repeated elsewhere and became a system, with circular clearings ranging over the entire temperate forest zone from Scandinavia to Spain, and the walled garden spreading from Persia across the Mediterranean to Andalusia. These archetypes became the initial compositional <chromosomes> of Occidental garden art; they evolved and recombined over subsequent centuries. They gradually fused into elaborate landscape compositions held within a perspective framework. The celebrated Renaissance garden of the Villa Lante at Bagnaia, with its forest clearings and terraced gardens is such a masterpiece in the permutation of archaic figures through the use of proportional dimensions, juxtapositions and geometry.<sup>1</sup> Sublime landscapes of the Occidental tradition relate through the same recombination of original compositional genes. They reconfigure a tradition of patterns as part of a strong and identifiable topological continuum in landscape design. The Occidental tradition developed a figurative language of its own based on an elaborate play between axial symmetry and its asymmetrical counterpart. The resulting compositional play is about the distribution of various elements set within a perspective field. Occidental composition, therefore, works with a predetermined frame fitted into place conceptually, regardless of the inherent qualities of a place. This absolute necessity for a fixed figure of depth and direction in landscape composition marks the most fundamental differences between Occidental and Oriental traditions.

The Oriental landscape tradition, particularly in China and Japan, developed an approach to composition based on a geomantic belief in cosmic balance. Landscape figuration works here symbolically at many scales, as a microcosm centred on the power of the void. Sublime examples of Ming landscapes like the Garden of the Nets in Suzhou, show a timeless cosmic balance within each detail. The key to meaning in Oriental landscapes is artistically coded in secular pictorial and calligraphic

<sup>1</sup> This was made possible with the use of a perspective tool called Lanci's device. Vignola: *Practica della Prospettiva*, Roma, 1583.

2 Cheng, François: *Vide et Plein, le langage pictural chinois*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1979.

traditions. Each garden, is considered as a fragment of the whole, and understood also as a figure of virtuous human conduct. It is the moment when garden aesthetics meet Confucian precepts of ethics, virtue and courage imbedded in rock outcroppings and pine trees, obvious symbols of endurance and longevity.<sup>2</sup> Each plant and rock is precisely placed to exude a meta-meaning in the garden. The spatial realm created by the Oriental garden is spherical and atmospheric in figuration and its dynamic comes across to the Western eye as being non-directional. The all-encompassing beauty of this figure unfolds for the visitor only at the heart of the garden. The human subject is thus always imagined as inhabiting the landscape, symbol of



fig. a  
Figure standing by a rain swept bridge in the wind, Garden of the Humble Administrator in Suzhou.  
© Giro, Christophe.

virtuous balance and beauty. This view does not operate in directional terms, but rather as a 360° continuum fully immersed in the surroundings. Zigzag paths break up as they become tangent to the void. Their figure is allegorical as it defines the delicate balance between two sides that can never be the same. Nothing is predictable in such a garden, but each figure is clearly recognizable and meaningful. Landscape composition in the Oriental tradition works from the inside-out, it is therefore the polar opposite of the outside-in mode akin to the Occidental perspective projection.

Opposite compositional approaches to landscape figuration based either on a single thrust embodied by a strong conceptual trajectory, or the embodiment of a self-contained microcosm address the fundamental notion of depth of field and landscape occupancy differently. The Occidental tradition in garden art understands depth as the act of looking through to the horizon, whereas the Oriental tradition understands it simply as inhabiting the heart of a garden focused around the void. This fundamental difference in perception explains why we have remained respectively blind to the inherent compositional rules and effects of the other. But in both cases, despite fundamental conceptual differences between Rational science and Gnostic science, the act of composing a landscape in either tradition comes from an irresistible drive to create beauty, harmony and balance. It thus repeats an act of cultural communion with nature that is highly sacralised and reduced to the essential qualities of light, sound, smell, flow, texture, mass and ground. For instance, the symbolism of the bamboo, the orchid, the plum and the lotus in Chinese landscape as reduced as it may seem enhances the human senses and brings meaning and virtuous conduct into the garden.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Occidental tradition takes very ancient native plants like the trimmed yew, the linden and boxwood to express

3 Cheng, François: *Oeil Ouvert et Coeur Battant*, Ed. College des Bernardins, Litterature Ouverte, Paris 2011.



a rational mastery of nature.<sup>4</sup> In both traditions the elemental compositional characteristics of the ground, the wind, the water, as well as dappled light through foliage contribute equally to an intrinsic sense of place, intimacy and belonging. It is only the understanding of nature, and its subordination to human reason that differs fundamentally between both traditions. In other words, are we to learn something from nature, or can nature still learn something from us? For both traditions the artificiality of landscape production makes no doubt; but its intent and purpose is quite different, not to say opposite. Landscape composition is more about measured ritual and repetition than about pure invention. The delight is complete without ever having to be new, for instance there is nothing really new about sitting pleasantly under a tree in the shade, and this is the inherent beauty about landscape. Composing landscape could simply be about further distilling exquisite pleasures experienced by countless generations of visitors in a timeless way. As disappointing as this may sound to inspired garden inventors, good traditions never repeat themselves; but actually inspire further developments and improvements along a common vein. It could be said that all the treasures and mysteries of landscape figuration whether Occidental or Oriental, are still there in a tradition waiting to be recomposed. Igor Strawinsky once said in a lecture at Harvard in 1942 that «a true tradition does not just bear witness to some foregone past; it is a live force that can animate and inform the present».<sup>5</sup> In other words, landscape composition still has the means to inspire beauty and can bring forth comfort to people entrusted with this legacy.

4 Conan, Michel: *Baroque Garden Cultures, emulation, sublimation, subversion*, Durnbarton Oaks, Washington D.C. 2005.

5 Strawinsky, Igor: *Poétique Musicale*, Flammarion, Paris, 2000, p.100.

## DE-COMPOSE

Landscape de-composition took hold as a trend in the Occident after World War II. The take-over happened particularly in the 1960's and 1970's as a direct reaction to corporate landscape design of the time. De-composition can best be explained as the outright cultural negation of any tradition in landscape composition under the premise of eminent environmental urgency. What China experienced as a cultural and industrial revolution during the same period, Europe and America experienced as a social and environmental upheaval with dramatic consequences in landscape development. The sudden changes in landscape figuration are best expressed in the writings of Ian McHarg in America. He initiated a complete rupture from the figurative tradition through environmental zoning.<sup>6</sup> Traditional rules of landscape figuration were deemed obsolete because they were said to reflect unecological values. Centuries of landscape figuration and garden aesthetics were wiped off the map by environmental dogmatism. People advocacy swiftly replaced design talent, and environmental militancy replaced cultural history. It is as if you asked people with no formal training in music, to write collectively a symphony and play it, too. The disharmony that occurred in schools of landscape architecture following this period became stifling and unfortunately prevails to this day. Landscape history was replaced by environmental planning, and participatory design techniques replaced design studios. A general form of design amnesia set in, as in no other design discipline at the time. From Berlin to Berkeley design studios were completely abandoned and the question of landscape design composition and figuration was left aside because deemed irrelevant, formal and elitist. Landscape design was subsequently replaced by a generalized zoning approach to landscape planning, where the global ecological agenda with its system thinking became far more important and dominant than any sort of established design tradition.

Ironically, the Oriental tradition in landscape design operated its turn towards ecology much later. It is not until the 21<sup>st</sup> century that countries like Korea, Japan and now China started considering ecological planning at a larger scale as a valid alternative to Oriental landscape figuration. The acceptance of a more global form of designed nature arrived as a top-down phenomenon. But the resulting de-

6 McHarg, Ian: *Design with Nature*, American Museum of Natural History, 1967.

composed ecological projects that have been coming out of China as of late are figuratively quite similar to their Occidental counterparts. The projects favour ecology, phyto-remedial decontamination and biomass production overriding any other sort of aesthetic consideration. They all reflect a trend in ecological design that has been so normative in recent years, that it is actually difficult to distinguish the aesthetic genius of a Chinese wetland project from an American or European one. This is both good and bad, good for the fact that ecological consciousness has finally taken grip of the planet, and bad in the sense that the global ecological trends seem quite oblivious to local landscape figuration and cultural specificity. The scientific arguments behind these globally de-composed, disfigured ecological landscapes are often identical, everywhere defending planetary urgency, climate change, demography and biodiversity with strong emotional levers that seem oblivious to a clear figurative discourse.<sup>7</sup> What is actually missing in this de-composed approach to ecological zoning is a strong sense of landscape figuration capable of reflecting values of landscape beauty and garden poetics. Why have ecological terms replaced any other form of aesthetic consideration in landscape design? Are we not confusing here the notion of ethics with aesthetics? Why propagate some formless green «ecologism» around the planet, encouraging a brand of cultural iconoclasm often in complete disrespect of local tradition? The fact of the matter is that the traditional landscape design of a Japanese dry landscape garden (Karesansui) or of a Chinese Ming garden with their coded choice of vegetation and rock arrangements, offer solace and contemplation of nature; but it is a mode that is impossible to transfer to the context of a bustling city. The ideal spirit of the Oriental garden with its subtle coded view has shied away from modernity, and the ecological figures that are proposed have little to do with a tradition of compositional substance and poetic meaning.

After fifty years of applied practice in landscape ecology, we should be able to make a general assessment of the aesthetics that have stemmed out of militant ecological de-composition. As Yi Fu Tuan would say, we have entered a time of «separate realities» where humankind is standing at a crossroads of science and poetics and now needs to make sound choices anew.<sup>8</sup> Ecological planning was probably a necessity when it was first implemented back in the grassroots movement of the 1960's; but why was it done in systematic opposition to any form of landscape figuration? Why was the separation between nature and city acted out in such a blunt and consummate way? In the present state of affairs, heavy industry, urbanization and infrastructures have taken over huge stretches of territory with ruthless developments oblivious to the necessity of landscape composition. Why did vast areas of development never integrate substantial landscape figuration in their schemes? Ecology was always very defensive with respect to landscape composition, and it conveyed a rather iconoclastic and disfigured point of view in complete denial of a landscape design tradition. «Ecologism» used scientific evidence to justify compensatory measures in retribution for the destruction of existing natural environments, but without any clear compositional or figurative agenda. There can be no compositional objective for applied ecology, because its value theory is based on a quantitative systems approach. There is actually little room for any compositional dialogue with environmental scientists, since most are set within the certainty of deductive scientific evidence. The French philosopher Bruno Latour analyzed the inherent limitations of a deductive scientific discourse in ecology in a brilliant book entitled *The Politics of Nature*.<sup>9</sup> While de-composition has indeed been effective in annihilating any figurative reference to existing landscape traditions, it has actually done little to offer human solace in the environmental turmoil of urban peripheries. The fundamental break from a long-standing tradition in landscape figuration should be a matter of great concern for schools of design, for it may take a while for society to recover and induce the basic compositional knowledge that has been lost to «ecologism».

7 This trend in global green is best expressed in a recent publication by the Harvard GSD entitled *Ecological Urbanism: Ecological Urbanism*, edited by Mohsen Mostafavi, Lars Mueller Publishers, 2010.

8 Tuan, Yi Fu: *Segmented Worlds and Self*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1982.

9 Latour, Bruno: *Politics of Nature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2004.

Ecology cannot replace the poetic reception of a figure of landscape that has been finely chiselled into societal values and cultural beliefs since times immemorial. We, therefore, need to reconsider the role of landscape composition actively and at all scales. Ecology could easily become the subject of some larger landscape composition, and there are many arguments both economic and environmental that plead for the rehabilitation of an aesthetic of nature at the heart of our cities. We could also benefit enormously at this point from the balanced merger of the Orient-



fig. b  
Ecological rail yard with spontaneous vegetation growing on rubble in the *Schöneberg Südgelände*, Berlin.  
© Girot, Christophe.

tal and Occidental traditions. The feeling produced by such a coupling of traditions could be delightful and most rewarding. I am not speaking here of a forced union as shown in the Jesuit gardens of the Yuen Ming Yuan in Beijing, that imported grotesque waterworks and baroque «chinoiseries» into China in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the aim to colonize and proselytize the land.<sup>10</sup> I am speaking more about composing landscape at a conceptual level capable of managing both notions of trajectory and interiority. Some of the fundamental laws and truths about landscape figuration emanating from both traditions have been seriously neglected as of late, but there is good reason for hope in the combination of garden interiority with landscape projection. Purists may argue that combining antinomian traditions in landscape figuration could only lead to a fiasco; but could this be any worse that the current globalized trend in a de-composed and disfigured green ecology oblivious to cultural differences? A systemic and scientific understanding of nature will never replace the compositional power and beauty of a long-standing tradition in landscape figuration. Abstract scientific constructs such as biomes, biotopes, biomass and biospheres, do not suggest any figurative qualities and have become the pretext for a de-compositional jargon of non-design. The implementation of landscape ecology through laws and zoning ordinances was politically motivated by technocrats and natural scientists that had little sense of landscape aesthetics, and their credo was to let nature speak spontaneously without the help of man.

This cultural detachment, not to say dislocation between man and nature, through ecological pretext enabled it to become a virulent form of de-composed «non-aesthetics». The best examples are certainly the abandoned railway yards of *Schöneberg Südgelände* in Berlin, stemming from the rubble of World War II where

<sup>10</sup> The Yuen Ming Yuan Gardens located in the Summer Palace Grounds in Beijing. They were built in 1760 by the Jesuit architect Giuseppe Castiglione, as a present to the son of Emperor Quianlong to demonstrate the superiority of Occidental Garden Art and Religion through the implementation of elaborate fountains.



disfigured nature becomes a strong symbol of ecology. In the absence of a culture of landscape figuration today, we are left only with a vague notion of environmental adequacy that leaves little room for composition. Why has ecology tried to create its own value theory with the quantification of biodiversity, by categorically excluding landscape sensitivity and aesthetics? Why can't landscape figuration and aesthetics simply accept to integrate ecological principles in its composition? The answer to this demise is simple, the ecologists in charge of both projects and legislation were simply not trained in the art of landscape design, and they remained quite oblivious to its cultural relevance. But, in light of the exponential growth of cities at present is



fig. c  
Ecological rail yard mimesis: the High Line in New York designed by Field Operations.  
© unknown.

it not absurd to abandon all the lessons of a secular tradition in landscape figuration, to venture instead in the rather speculative failings of a freshly de-composed and ecologically correct environment? If examples of ecological de-composition had been effective in structuring new urban environments, why then do all our urban peripheries look and feel the way they do today? The defensive approach of an ecology geared against the city, has simply reached the limits of non-figuration. It is now time to act and reinstate landscape composition and aesthetics at the heart of our daily dwellings. Ecology is an obvious necessity and can contribute to the improvement of society, but it cannot become the only criterion of landscape validation. There seems to be no valid reason in negating the vital role of landscape aesthetics and figuration as a valid answer for a designed nature.

We must now reinvent rules of landscape figuration by integrating ecology. We will need to define a clear figurative vocabulary between landscape interior and exterior, projection and middle, place and void. A new blend of Occidental and Oriental figurative traditions may herald a return to a clear set of compositional rules in landscape design where topology, plants and natural elements will be imbued with greater cultural meaning. Landscape will become culturally specific again, while remaining ecological. It will bring back a degree of harmony, faith and recognition to places that we inhabit. Global society has been governed by a set of abstract beliefs in ecology and sustainability, that seem like marketing ploys rather than anything rooted in reality. Ecological branding from Masdar in Abu-Dhabi to the High Line in New York have become little more than fashion. The celebrated living green façade of Jean Nouvel's Quai Branly Museum in Paris by Patrick Blanc, has been hidden, perhaps momentarily by green silkscreened Plexiglas panels. There is a lesson to be



learned from the failings of such an eco-hype, it is the renewed trust in a secular landscape tradition in composition that has accompanied the growth of cities since the earliest sedentary times. It is now time to think ecologically, but also to re-compose and reconfigure our landscapes based on our intimate cultural beliefs. Bringing the figurative tradition of the Orient together with that of the Occident may be the dawn of new kind of attention to landscape beauty, comfort and durability. Let us hope for this age where landscapes re-composed, will be the prelude to a society capable of reconciling and configuring its living environment according to custom and locality, drawing from the most common and humble details, the very substance of life, joy, posterity and faith in the world.

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