

A RETURN TO TERRAIN

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Prologue

Each and every landscape on earth is unique because of its particular cultural context, climate, topography and location. In light of this assertion, why have we accepted to work with landscape methods that tend to be systematic, universal and oblivious to most of these local nuances? Whereas architecture can effectively lay claim to some international form of design through Modernism and Postmodernism, with ready examples that attest to the existence of a built culture that is common to many regions of the globe, landscape architecture can rarely make such a claim. Landscape, in general, tends to remain very regional in scope because it is intimately bound to local language, forms of dwelling and customs. This essay is a plea for a return to terrain, for the recovery of a fuller understanding of the potential and meaning of a site, using appropriate instruments and methods.

In spite of our rapid ascent into a world of advanced computerized landscape design, we must step aside from virtual reality in order to come to grips, once more, with the thorny and sometimes treacherous reality of terrain. The reason for this renewed awareness of terrain is the increasing pace at which change is occurring in many regions of the world. Terrains are being rapidly altered due to marked social and environmental factors, such as floods, droughts, sea level rise, urbanization and increasing needs for transportation, to name but a few. We need to cultivate an intelligence of place in the form of an informed awareness that can become a prelude to design. The embodiment of a landscape has always been a strong cultural act of transformation, which engages our understanding of scales, in terms of space and time, and both physically and emotionally. For this reason, precise measurements and field investigations are essential to a renewed understanding of terrain.

Origins of Terrain

Terrain is a notion that reaches all the way back to a time when simple human and animal paths canvassed the territory. These early paths trailed over long distances and reflected the natural features and unique qualities of ground. Simply put, back then a path was just a stretch of trodden ground, be it mud, soil, sand or stone. This primitive