

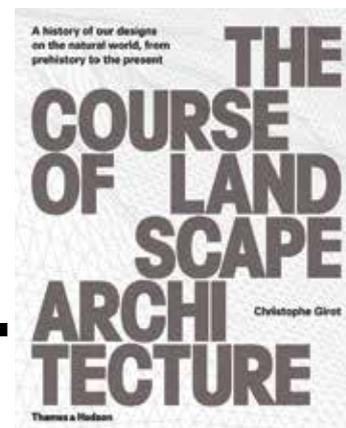
# THROUGH THE HOURGLASS:

## LANDSCAPE'S LEGACY AND THE FUTURE OF THE FIELD

THE COURSE OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE:  
A HISTORY OF OUR DESIGNS ON THE NATURAL  
WORLD, FROM PREHISTORY TO THE PRESENT

**BY CHRISTOPHE GIROT; NEW YORK:  
THAMES & HUDSON, 2016; 352 PAGES, \$75.**

REVIEWED BY JULIA CZERNIAK

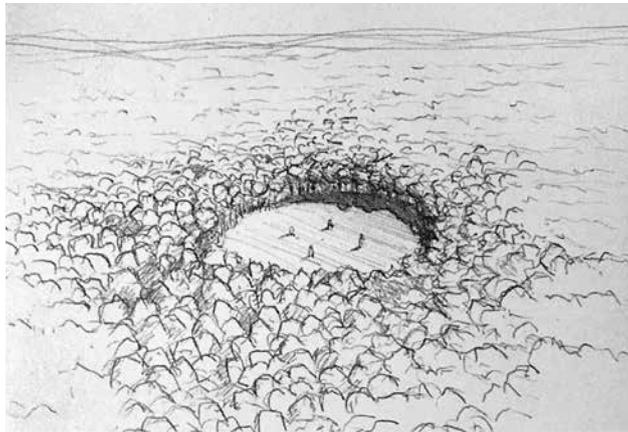


### AN AIM AND A PLEA

With a length and scope to match its ambition, *The Course of Landscape Architecture* endeavors to recover the cultural value of landscape over its instrumentalization. The richly illustrated tome organized into 12 chapters—representing more than 20 years of research by the landscape thinker, practitioner, and ETH educator Christophe Girot—is grounded in the fundamental tenet that artifacts reveal how nature has been shaped by human culture to reflect the sociopolitical forces and technical progress of a place and a people throughout time. This shaping, of course, occurs at many scales and in many forms, driven by the need for shelter and food (utility), beauty and meaning (aesthetics), and much more. Girot's particular concern, however, is tracing the personal motives and impersonal forces that affect this shaping. In “the end of a millennia-old intricate...relationship between humankind and landscape,” he laments, environmental problem-solving has superseded aesthetic concerns so that landscape architecture might “simply disappear as an art, to the benefit of science and engineered sustainability.” While provisionally overplaying the current divide between ecological and design

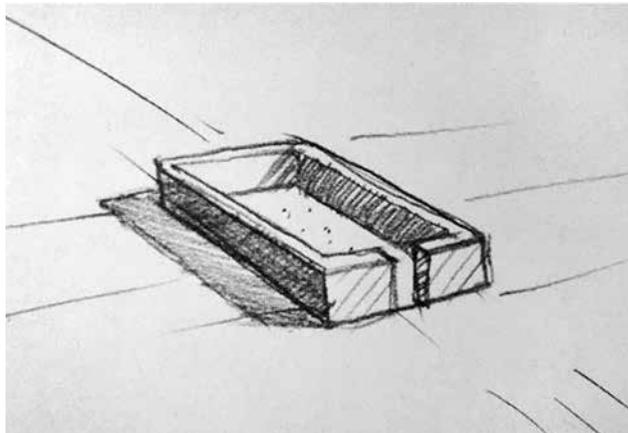
matters, he argues that landscape architects must not simply produce environmentally responsible design but also “question the dominant moralistic posture behind the ecological and the sustainable.” The aim of Girot's passionate and pressing project is to demystify the visions of nature that have held sway over time and trace their consequences so that the reader may critically assess and question them. We should not, however, misread this aim as a dismissal of global concerns on his part. By valuing what he calls “strong formal acts upon nature and not just environmental modalities,” his book makes a plea to “return to the fundamentals of a culture of landscape true to the values of human balance and meaning that have nurtured and enriched countless generations.”

The result is inspiring. This book is not simply informative; it is likely to be quite influential in that it combines the precise knowledge of a historian with the projective aspirations of a design thinker in an astutely argued and beautifully written form that refocuses discussions of landscape on aesthetics and meaning. Girot's strategy is threefold. First, through a scholarly essay and 12 case studies (reinforced with images, diagrams, and significant 3-D graphic reconstructions), not only does he



**Two archetypes.**

The forest clearing and the walled garden form the basis of a genealogy of Western landscape architecture. The differences between the two stem essentially from distinct climatic and topological conditions, but it is precisely the cultural juxtaposition, the mixing and hybridization of these two 'chromosomes' over time, that is of particular interest. (Caption from book.)



present how particular landscapes are shaped by their historical and environmental contexts, affecting their perception, he also rereads our landscape legacy through clever thematic frames and the landscape archetypes that inform them. Second, not only does Girot build on a lineage of landscape books foregrounding the imaginative, he advances (in both the book's structure and content) new forms of representation (in word and image) that encourage fresh speculation. Finally, not only does he trace the myriad forces that shape our natural environment, he confidently gathers these concerns within the fold of landscape architecture, expanding the discipline's reach. In his call to consider the effect our actions have beyond our immediate environment, he also extends the discipline's agency. In doing so, he reinforces a belief in landscape architecture's ability to engage the anthropocentric age.

**LEGACY**

**G**irot ties the presentation of what he calls "our landscape legacy" to the internal structure of the book. With its chronologic order, requisite sampling of projects across time

and space, and positioning of projects within their own cultural context, the book belongs to the tradition of landscape histories by other landscape architects and architects, namely Norman T. Newton's *Design on the Land* (1971) and Geoffrey and Susan Jellicoe's *The Landscape of Man* (1975). Whereas the chapters of these earlier books organize material by place and period (for example, Italy during the Renaissance), Girot's chapters group projects thematically (e.g., "Topology"). This framework differentiates chapters quite radically, while his tracing of landscape archetypes (e.g., the walled garden and the forest clearing) creates a through line that unites them. The conceptual tone is set by themes such as "Hydraulic Civilizations" (describing how the very survival of early Egyptian settlements was based on the innovative and efficient use of water), "Gravity" (which not only suggests laws of motion and—more broadly—how scientific truths [not men] ruled the universe, but also denotes a conceptual breakthrough that had radical influence on advancing landscape as an instrumental force to be harnessed for productive ends—as evidenced in hedgerows, agricultural fields, and pastures), and "Acceleration" (of change, of our bodies, of our modes of transportation, all of which radically altered the rules of design and development—where highways and parking lots render 19th-century spatial models irrelevant). In precise ways, these themes serve to both curate the content and illuminate the unfolding story regarding the technical advances, social conditions, and natural and cultural contexts in which landscape artifacts participate. As important, the thematic organization allows Girot to end each chapter with more recent examples. For instance, in the "Hydraulic Civilizations" chapter, Girot opens with a discussion of the Neolithic villages of Jarmo and Jericho and concludes with a look at California's Peripheral Canal. In this way Girot presents landscape's legacy as living and evolving, as artifacts shaped by ongoing forces and processes.

Perhaps the most important theme is presented in chapter 1, "Roots: On the Origins of Landscape." Here Girot advances the walled garden and the forest clearing as the first landscape archetypes, the genealogical bases of all Western landscape. Initially differentiated by climatic and topological conditions, both evolve and dissolve through a series of permutations

in form, use, and meaning. The walled garden performs variously as lushly stylized nature, an austere place for meditation, a sacred space rich with meaning and myth, a sensual and atmospheric site, an expression of cosmic order and human purpose, and an area of reason and power. The forest clearing undergoes its own set of changes, from a communal space surrounded by darkness and demons, to a hiding place for lepers and whores, to a landscape garden within an inclusive territorial dominion.

It is precisely Girot's conceptual facility with interpreting these two archetypes and speculating on their appearance, performance, and meaning over time that makes this book a pleasure to read, in that their transformation across time is so vividly explained. The author tracks the way in which walls become hedges and turn back again into walls, scaled up and composed of different materials. After the forests of Europe disappear, they are replanted to represent a rugged wilderness and transformed, again, into a clearing. Girot offers a view of the English landscape garden as nature remade—more of a forest in a clearing than a clearing in the forest—with Capability Brown's famous tree clumps at Blenheim offering an inverted archetype. Regarding Central Park, "One could almost abstract the buildings behind 7th Avenue and 59th Street," Girot suggests, "and imagine the park as a magnificent walled garden set within a vast metropolitan desert." By the 21st century, he maintains, these particular landscape archetypes have largely disappeared, having been stripped of their historical references and reduced to barren strips of lawn. In some landscape work, however, archetypes persist, such as in the Parc Sausset by Michel Corajoud (the "master of the clearing in the clearing," to whom the book is dedicated). In discussing such work, Girot lives up to his promise *not* to deliver "a nostalgic glance at artifacts from the past," rather, in presenting examples culled from past and present centuries, he cultivates continuity.

## IMAGINATION

More than 40 years ago, Newton and Jellicoe used reconstructions to help them demonstrate how shaped nature both reflects and constructs culture. Early in his book, Newton presents a hand-drawn axonometric reconstructing Queen Hatshepsut's temple in order to give readers a perspective on its complete design. Geoffrey Jellicoe similarly includes his own drawing, a three-dimensional view of the Altar of Heaven built by the Ming in 1420, to illustrate what he describes as the relationship between the "heavenly circle" and the "earthly square." Both authors recognize the power

of representation to shape our perception of the landscape—how we understand it, value it, and subsequently act upon it. One of the most striking features of Girot's book is his detailed, three-dimensional re-creations of sites showing their original contexts, through which the author continues the experimental tradition that relates imaging and imagining. Girot is emphatic on the role of imagination: His *raison d'être* for understanding landscape's genealogy and cultural specificity resides in "our capacity to reinvent, with

confidence, a constructive imagination."

Most of the reconstructions are three-dimensional views of sites before and after their shaping: the oak forested land of Avebury before it was cleared for the henge; the Faiyum Oasis in Egypt before and after the construction of the waterway that enables the development of luxurious gardens; Greece's Amphissa Valley, before and after the sanctuary complex at Delphi was created; and so on. What these images do not tell us, their captions do, helping us to see the landscape logics Girot would like us to understand in the graphic reconstructions themselves. Most successful are the 3-D models in which much shaping has occurred, such as the reconstruction of Hadrian's Villa on its expansive 300-acre site and of the Villa Lante

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**Reconstructed before and after views of the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont.**

Originally an abandoned gypsum quarry with undefined terrain and scattered housing, it became an elaborate park, with winding roads and paths, and including an underground train line and a central water collector. Situated in a working-class district of Paris, the new park attracted better quality housing around its perimeter.

(Caption from book.)

in Bagnaiia, with its complex terracing. Another remarkably effective reconstruction features the Buttes-Chaumont in Paris. Before and after views model the undefined terrain of the gypsum quarry and the park that will eventually reconfigure it. What makes these particular drawings work so well is that the imaging strategy (3-D modeling) serves the conceptual underpinning of the park itself—the reshaping of a strong existing topography. As a consequence of such successful examples, I am left wondering whether such studies similarly serve the conceptual underpinning of projects such as the Parc de la Villette. This massing model, which includes the Grande Halle and neoclassical pavilions set on



a gray tabula rasa, does not make visible strong influences on the scheme, such as the presence of the cattle market and abattoir that earlier occupied the site and animated urban life.

Other than simply presenting these reconstructions, the book does not make much use of them. Reference is made in the acknowledgments to the thoughtful dialogue and years of work that enabled their production. I would have appreciated more discussion of the aspirations for these images. This would help position them within the ongoing project of landscape representation, or more specifically, the project to relate imaging to imagining advanced by the work of designers and thinkers such as James Corner, ASLA; Dilip da Cunha and Anuradha Mathur; Alan Berger; and, more recently, Kate Orff, ASLA. One certainly gets the impression that an intensive amount of information is embedded in these reconstructions that is not conveyed to the reader.

In addition to the three-dimensional models that illuminate each chapter, Girot uses the page layout itself to catalyze imagination. An introductory quotation and enlarged text passages interspersed in the main text body (for emphasis) are joined by a large number of illustration captions. Far from simple titles or descriptions, these (often opinionated) captions form a monologue in their own right. It is here that Girot's hybrid voice as critic/theorist/designer emerges most strongly, shifting the emphasis from what we see (the conventional use of the caption) to what we might interpret. The author *speculates* (relating, for instance, the geometric principles of South Dakota's grid to an early archetype at Yazd, Iran); he *interprets* ("the forest became a cathedral of sorts with its rows of living trees defining a natural nave"); he *supplements* (carving icons from wood was "an attempt to Christianize the trees"); he *declares* ("The metaphor of the oasis as a built paradise is clear."); he *criticizes* ("The way in which native peoples were depicted as man-eating savages left an indelible mark on our consciousness."); he *questions* (asking of the purple heath covering the environmentally abused landscape of Lower Saxony, "Could it be that ecology, nature, and beauty are all just constructs in the making?"); and, indeed, he *imagines* (where a field of posts might invoke "the injustice" of an owner's terminal illness and death).

**DISCIPLINARITY**

The oft-forgotten subtitle of Norman Newton's book is *The Development of Landscape Architecture*. Although the author briefly charts the course of early Western traditions, the book focuses largely on the development of landscape architecture in the United States after it acquired the status of a profession in the 1890s. Contrary to this effort, many important recent books reflect what their authors see as disciplinary and professional shortcomings. Invoking a productive moment by distancing landscape from its historic qualifier "architecture," landscape architecture per se is absent in their titles. For instance, James Corner's *Recovering Landscape* (1999) implies renewal, invention, and transformation; *The Landscape Urbanism Reader* (2006) by Charles Waldheim, Honorary ASLA, offers landscape as an element of urban infrastructure, as opposed to an art historical genre, an environmental science, or an applied art; and my own *Large Parks* (2007) qualifies

**A landscaped rubbish dump in the Netherlands.**

The lunar quality of the artificial mount attracts bikers who see in the slope a great opportunity to train. The people appear tall next to dwarfed trees on a severely eroded terrain, contributing to the awkward aesthetic of this *terrain vague*. (Caption from book.)



disciplinary concerns by size. These represent just a few of the many books published during the past two decades that are largely preoccupied with what landscapes *do* rather than what they *mean* or what they *look like*. This is surely something to which Girot is reacting.

The title of Girot's volume is anything but accidental. The "course of landscape architecture" he charts aspires to expand the discipline's scope in space and time and to accumulate its knowledge as part of our disciplinary and professional reality. His final two chapters are especially important in this regard, as they offer frameworks for reading recently built projects, which previous books of this comprehensive type do not. Chapter 11, for instance, advances a context for practice as "Terrain Vague," which builds on the concept of ground theorized by Ignasi de Solà-Morales as the "by-product of our age, in which outrageous violence done to a particular strip of ground results in the obliteration and amalgamation of traces." Girot explains that not only does this context have a powerful effect on our appreciation of landscape aesthetics (while distancing the two archetypes—the walled garden and the forest clearing—to the past), it also exacerbates the disciplinary schism between what he refers to as "secular artistic design" traditionalists and "environmental healers" by fueling the impulse to engage ecological concerns. More positively, he argues that although the archetypes he has traced are largely gone, this terrain offers new creative territory. Projects as diverse as Field Operations' Tommy Thompson Park (where a dredge heap turns, surprisingly, into a wilderness) or Peter Latz's Duisburg Nord Landscape Park (where traces of the walled garden return, filled with mutant flora in the decantation pits)—both positioned elsewhere under the subdisciplines of landscape urbanism, landscape infrastructure, or ecological urbanism—are here refreshingly reframed.

One of the more provocative aspects of Girot's course of landscape architecture, however, is invoked by Philip Ursprung in the book's foreword. There, Ursprung asks us to think about the effect of our actions beyond our immediate environment: in other words, to think about how shaping the landscape (both consciously and unconsciously) impacts not just the *here and now* but also the *there and later*—for example, the way



**One of the highly contaminated decantation pits at the Duisburg Nord project.**

The archetype of the walled paradise garden is obvious, but it is a garden to be looked at and not walked in, with 'mutant flora' growing tightly packed in serial rows.  
(Caption from book.)

SCAPE's Ocean Flood Barrier projects, Hargreaves Associates' Crissy Field, and many others as exemplifying this negotiation. It is perhaps the last that best makes his point: Crissy Field is replete with both representational landforms and functioning wetlands (i.e., real and symbolic nature).

Perhaps the most ambitious contribution of the book is made in the last pages, where Girot asks the question, "How can topology develop into a new language of landscape?" It is in the precise definition and application of this concept, however, that the reader may get lost. Girot states elsewhere that "topology is meant to weave meaningful symbolism back into a particular place by understanding its terrain and surface condition" that is enabled by new tools of 3-D observation, representation, and modeling. Moving beyond its mathematical definition, topology is proposed as a new way of thinking and imagining. Although the reader gets the idea that his enriched concept of topology offers a way to rediscover meaning in the landscape, the examples he cites could be elaborated.

industrialization contributes to climate change or pesticide use kills off species down the food chain. Standing firmly in the Anthropocene, Girot takes us to a place where earlier authors have not tread, a place where the context for design has been radically changed by shaping forces that cannot be ignored.

### LOOKING FORWARD

To stand firmly in the 21st century and look back at the thousands of years of landscape architecture that came before must be taken as a sign of optimism. Girot's work demonstrates a belief that formal acts on the land are capable of expressing cultural meaning and value, and revisiting these not only enriches our understanding but also catalyzes our action to reengage in our work what landscapes mean, not simply what they do. The archetypes that thread so beautifully through this book have perhaps run their course, but to look back at them serves to frame our way forward more clearly. As Girot himself explains, his book "should work like an hourglass filtering aspects of the past that have remained to this day, and looking toward the future through present questions."

In his last chapter, "Topology: Rediscovering Meaning in the Landscape," Girot leaves us well poised to engage this request. Pointing to notable examples of projects that bridge ecology and design, he expresses his confidence that landscape architects can negotiate valuing both. Girot points to Turenscape's Tianjin Qiaoyuan Wetland Park, West 8 and MRIO's Madrid Rio,

Although I have minor quibbles with this book—its lack of discussion of representation, its exaggeration of the disparity between the concerns of ecology and those of design, and its slight elusiveness in describing the potential role of topology—its premises and promises are sure to engage and inspire. The best thing about reading the work of an imaginative thinker like Girot is that it catalyzes our own thoughts. Within the context of globally rising seas, I begin to wonder if the 21st-century archetype that might replace the walled garden and the forest clearing may be sets of topographic formations—bumps, really, of different shapes and sizes, used to create soft infrastructure and resilient waterfronts. Perhaps the walled garden is less a cultivated world set in a ravaged forest and more a place we lovingly maintain. Whatever we might speculate, Girot's endeavor is sure to fuel such imagining—and for this we owe him immense thanks. ●

JULIA CZERNIAK IS ASSOCIATE DEAN AND PROFESSOR OF ARCHITECTURE AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, WHERE SHE TEACHES STUDIOS AS WELL AS SEMINARS ON LANDSCAPE THEORY AND CRITICISM.