

**ILA**

Institute of Landscape Architecture
Professor Christophe Girot
theory lab

theory lab lecture series

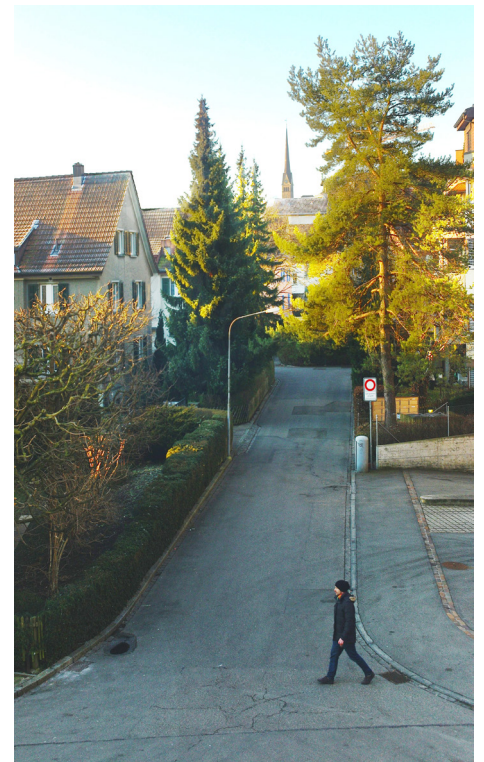
Landscape Imagination FS 2018 V03

"...There is nothing natural about landscape: even though landscape invokes nature and engages natural processes over time, it is first a cultural constant, a product of the imagination"

James Corner
The Landscape Imagination, New York 2014

Beyond the wastelands of a terrain vague, and the slow yet hopeful promise of a designed ecology, there exists a dimension of landscape, which is much more immediate and palpable, namely that of the imagination. As the Nobel Prize in Literature J.M.G. Le Clézio wrote: "This is the place where we act with imagination, not so much by modifying the world, but rather by preparing it." The act of imagination is stronger than any design for it acts directly on the meaning of a landscape through images and words that we associate with them. Imagination requires first and foremost a strong mythical substrate tied to an understanding of place in order to operate effectively. Over the course of time, landscapes have acquired meaning and the precise forms given to nature within that context result from the interaction between human events and constructs. We are seldom aware of the mythical dimension taken by a landscape in our everyday life, but meaning indeed hides behind each and every scenery that we experience. landscape imagination is fundamental to our perception and understanding of the world it is the essence of any design. There often exists a strong narrative structure within a landscape that is as potent as it is rooted, and only readable through the precise cultural coding of signs and natural symbols. This highly irrational and creative dimension of landscape carries layers of what the historian Simon Schama calls in his book *Landscape and Memory* "mythical unreason." It is, therefore, the symbolic weight given to distinct features of a landscape and its representation, which brings meaning to the whole. But, what you see is not necessarily what you get in terms of significance, when engaging in the contemporary landscape, imagination is more about feeling and subliminal meaning than it is about concrete facts.

As a demonstration of its potential, we shall examine landscape imagination along three distinct lines. The first line will consider the evolution of a particular form of landscape depiction within the cultural sphere. By borrowing from the lineage of a given pictorial tradition, it will examine precisely built-up meaning in the representation of projects through the layering of notable symbolic references. The second line will take the literary dimension of landscape imagination through time, juxtaposing it to the production of landscapes against a background of mythical references such as the "forest of the origins" (*Urwald*). This literary dimension will also be played against the notion of unwanted "invasions" and "neophytes" that are part of the current popular discourse. The third line will address the invention of future natures, which break away from their traditional roots and try to reinvent themselves entirely.



Church in the forest, Oerlikon
Photo: Christophe Girot

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More often than not, the latter approach ranging from the most banal modern landscapes to the most extravagant deconstructed environments must reinvent their own myth of landscape in the present.

Without the strong potion of landscape imagination, many current projects would remain without a voice and without a face, unless we seek through semiotics the diaphanous relationship of signifier and signified that will enable us to further unveil what really lies beneath the true surface of things.

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The Cross in the Mountains, 1812, Caspar David Friedrich, Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf

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