Vegetation is probably the most manifest element that distinguishes architecture from landscape architecture. Since its early appearance as algae, ferns and bryophytes has been evolving into the more complex forms of gymnosperms and angiosperms, terrestrial vegetation spans across an extraordinary range of periods in a variety of forms, textures and substances. Unlike buildings, plant growth expresses a very slow living process in direct correlation with ongoing conditions of cultivation and climate. For this reason landscapes achieve maturity only long after their initial construction has begun; thus vegetation becomes the temporal and seasonal reference of our daily condition, and is often interpreted as a permanent traditional feature of the environment although it is only there in passing. Landscape projects, therefore, develop over a span of time and demand regularity and continuity in cultural practices to survive.

The selection and handling of plant material in landscapes remains highly symbolic and ideological throughout history; this changes drastically with ambient conditions in successive generations. Every epoch makes its choice of desirable and undesirable plants. With their specific role and form, they become the expression of circumstantial preconceptions about nature. Vegetation is, therefore, the necessary expression of an idea of nature; it is the most visible part of a construct where the choice, the order and the spatial arrangement of plants play a primordial role in expressing the balance of our relationship to earth.

Our scientific age would simply prefer that vegetation is the bare expression of a natural and quantifiable phenomenon called biomass. Vegetation is indeed the only living material capable of transforming solar energy efficiently into both food and fuel. Petroleum for that matter is just a fossilized form of biomass not to be replaced. But vegetation is also an extraordinary remedial device, capable of fixing vast quantities of carbon from the atmosphere, as well as a broad variety of noxious chemical elements locked in the water and ground through its roots. “Phytoremediation”, as it is commonly called, is only beginning to play a significant role in the long term treatment of contaminated soils and sewage water. It will certainly play a growing role in the transformation of industrial and urban landscapes in the future. In the “Anthropocene” age that we are entering, vegetation will compete more and more between areas for the treatment of contaminants, food and energy production. It is interesting to understand how this significant shift will affect the entire landscape aesthetic of a region.
Vegetation is evolving rapidly into other forms of planting for bioclimatic control. Plants are used to cool buildings, retain moisture and help to treat water. At a larger scale, deciduous trees significantly improve microclimatic conditions by generating shade in the summer, and allowing sunshine coming through in the winter. Hedgerows heavily reduce the impact of wind and dust on the environment thus reducing the effects of drought, while clusters of trees also help to gradually reestablish the ambient level of water tables. We have entered an age where vegetation practices are in breach of tradition, and need to be entirely rethought and reorganized at the territorial scale. This is not just a matter of providing new raw material and pleasure grounds for mankind. This is about sustaining ecological balance and diversity through a continual biological network of vegetation. Undeniably, there is a paradigm shift in the way we are starting to think about nature. We can certainly draw some lessons from past periods of landscape history in which massive structural plantings occurred. But with the massive environmental and climatic changes that loom ahead, it seems quite pointless to quibble about the greater naturalness of a curve versus a straight line when planting some trees. Now, the question at stake is, how to think nature and invent a new sustainable aesthetic relationship to it?

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Literature: