

BOOK REVIEW

The course of landscape architecture: a natural history of our designs on the natural world, from prehistory to the present, by Christophe Girot, London, Thames & Hudson, 2016, 375 pp., 670 illustrations, £45.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780500342978

Christophe Girot's *The Course of Landscape Architecture* is a milestone. No single work of this breadth and ambition has appeared since John Ormsbee Simonds' *Landscape Architecture: The Shaping of Man's Natural Environment* in 1961, and none has so convincingly situated the domain of the discipline within wider human impulses.

The book appears at a moment when landscape architecture appears torn between its origins in the creative arts, aesthetics, and moral philosophy, and an increasingly dominant vision of the discipline as a positivist, 'evidence based' field charged with repairing—or at least preventing further damage to—a natural world degraded by human activity. Girot leaves little doubt about where he stands in this debate. Landscapes have 'always resulted from strong formal acts upon nature and not just environmental modalities,' he writes in the introduction, adding that 'we ought to question the dominant moralistic posture behind the ecological and the sustainable, and allow ourselves to demystify this vision of nature critically, while acknowledging the reality of new necessities.' He describes the book as a 'plea for a 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' (p. 13).

Girot's argument is primarily structural in character. As used in the book 'landscape architecture' is merely shorthand for the ancient, universal tendency of human societies to imagine and change their biophysical environment in ways that are meaningful to them. The landscapes that result from this tendency 'have always mirrored the religious and political forces in society, and each transition demonstrates a response to the sacred beliefs and technical progress of a given period.' The present nervous age is no exception, and Girot advises the reader that he will 'draw little distinction between the powerful influence of oracles in ancient Mesopotamia and the blind faith we currently place in scientific predictions' (p. 10).

This structural approach is reflected in the book's organisation. 'Authored' landscapes are comparatively few for a publication of this type. Instead Girot presents, in twelve roughly chronological chapters, a series of themes and topics in the history of human 'designs on the natural world.' The story is bracketed by two climate change events: the sudden rise of the Black Sea in the eighth century BCE, which drove the human exodus into Asia, Europe, and the Middle East at the dawn of civilisation, and the anthropogenic warming of the atmosphere today, whose effects on human society (and all life) promise to be even more dramatic. Between them Girot leads the reader through six millennia of human manipulation of the biophysical environment, from the first 'hydraulic civilizations' in the Fertile Crescent and Egypt (Chapter 2), to the temples of Greece and villas of Rome (Chapters 3 and 4), to nineteenth-century urban parks and greenways (Chapter 9), to post-industrial *terrains vagues* and ecological 'restoration' projects today (Chapters 11 and 12). A leading role is given to the scientific and technical advances that made possible new ways of understanding and shaping landscape, whether sexagesimal geometry and time in Sumeria, Linnaeus' taxonomy, the internal combustion engine, or the cybernetic revolution.

Girot's emphasis, however, is on continuity rather than rupture, and on those persistent 'early landscape structures,' such as the forest clearing or enclosed garden, that 'despite their great age ...

are still identifiable on the ground today' (p. 10). Each chapter therefore concludes with an extended discussion of a single landscape that, while embodying the values and preoccupations of its time, also operates on a deeper, 'archetypal' level. Some of these examples are the products of known designers, but most are not, and even those that are have been created just as often by artists and engineers as by landscape architects. For example, the 'clumps and archetypal circles' around the artist Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage on the Kentish coast are likened, in the chapter on *terrain vagues*, to 'a sacred Neolithic microcosm' (pp. 293, 294). And Girot ends the book with a discussion of the 150-m-high Sigirino Mound in Ticino, Switzerland, made from 3.5 million cubic metres of rubble excavated during construction of the Ceneri Base Tunnel. In Girot's telling the lineage of this radically modern landscape, made possible only by 'pioneering techniques in topology and morphing' (p. 319), leads all the way back to Silbury Hill at Avebury in Wiltshire, built some 5000 years before. 'Both,' he concludes, 'are artificial earthworks that express strongly the beliefs of their times' (p. 321).

A particular strength of the book is layout. The main text, subsidiary text, and captions are clearly and elegantly presented, and the large number of high-quality illustrations, many in colour, considerably enhances the reader's experience and understanding of the themes and sites under discussion. Particularly notable are spare but revealing computer-rendered reconstructions of each of the main examples, both before and after human manipulation. At a time when much writing on landscape seems abstract, even bloodless, such attention to the material and the sensory is welcome.

The book does have its limitations. Despite Girot's emphasis on 'cultural specificity and identity over systemic thinking' (p. 13), some readers may find that he downplays the political and social aspects of landscape in favour of deep structures across millennia. The 'we' that appears in the title and throughout the text is clearly intended to denote 'people everywhere, anytime.' But (as has been widely noted) landscapes are often produced by some *particular* 'we' to consolidate or express its own power. Girot makes no attempt to obscure this, and indeed many passages describe how particular landscapes throughout history have emerged from practices that enforced unequal access to resources, particularly water. But readers expecting more probing treatment of these issues may be unsatisfied. The book's relatively narrow geographical focus, on a fairly standard array of sites located mostly in Europe and North America, will also strike some as belying Girot's ecumenical claims.

Related to this is a certain discrepancy between the book's title and its content. It is clear from the outset that Girot has an expansive vision of landscape architecture, one that far exceeds the current boundaries of the profession. 'Landscape architecture,' he writes, 'can serve as a major force in the definition of our future environment' and 'cultivate a strong poetic response to human needs and beliefs' (p. 13) at a time when 'the culture of forming landscape transmitted from one generation to the next has been blocked' (p. 338). And yet the fact remains that landscape architecture *is* a profession, by no means the only one concerned with shaping the human environment and arguably less extensive in its effects than civil engineering, urban planning, or even the 'architecture' whose name it borrows. What is more, the birth of 'landscape architecture' as such postdates most of the landscapes described in the book. Some readers may therefore find themselves wanting more explicit treatment of the discipline's history and current debates in relation to the structures and archetypes Girot explores.

These, however, are minor deficiencies. *The Course of Landscape Architecture* remains a rich, illuminating, and handsome volume likely to appeal to anyone, regardless of discipline or profession, interested in the diverse ways 'nature has been reshaped by human culture' (p. 9) during *Homo sapiens'* brief stay on this planet. At a time of deep crisis in our relationship with the biosphere, one suspects this is almost everyone; the book finally earns the 'we' in its title.

Thomas Oles
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

 thomas.oles@slu.se

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