

Terrain Vague FS 2019 V01

The idea of nature has undergone such profound alterations recently, that one can actually talk about a fundamental shift in our understanding and perception of the world. Since the 1980s, climate change has become a scientifically-measurable phenomenon with its battery of cataclysmic predictions and consequences for the environment. But reactions to this foretold catastrophic phenomenon have brought up a variety of interpretations, for the most part irrational and quite emotional. This has led to a quite unstable situation in which the founding myth of a nurturing nature, inherited from the Romantics and the Classics, has run aground and been replaced by the blurry vision of a very threatening and all-destructive nature. This paradigm change bears direct consequences on our apprehension of nature and thus also on the role and responsibility of landscape architecture. Two possible attitudes toward nature prevail: one tends toward nostalgia and romantic abandonment, and the other seeks adaptation and a regenerative approach to landscape. The former attitude is much easier to grasp for it is based on a cultural inheritance from the past, however, it bears few solutions for the future. The latter proves far more challenging, for it beholds a dimension of nature that is still unknown and that we will need to contend with for times to come. We have looked at the evolution of our attitude toward nature through landscape design since the most remote times in history; we will now attempt to define a new approach to landscape architecture, which is better adapted to a world in full mutation.

The aforementioned attitudes toward nature open different perspectives. The first is much more comfortable, because it simply replicates an established way of thinking. In this instance, the fatality of natural ruin and decay is perceived as an aesthetic achievement per se. Generations of artists, writers and designers have intellectualized this condition during each epoch and contributed to the establishment of a convenient kind of laissez-faire nostalgia. This nostalgia ranges from Andy Goldsworthy's sentimental leaf, stone and ice arrangements to the brute works and photographs of Robert Smithson and Fischli & Weiss, to mention but a few. Within this process of romantic contemplation, the terrain vague has become the receptacle of countless mundane commentaries about the imminent end of our depraved society. But the terrain vague has not yet been understood as a possible beginning rather than an end, a starting point of sorts toward another kind of landscape culture, albeit mutant.

Looking into remote history, we witness cultures that have disappeared for their inability to adapt to drastic climate change. Whether this came from a gradual dessication of the environment or sudden flooding, the failing patterns of societal and landscape adaptation also greatly contributed to this downfall. For this same reason, a change of attitude toward nature seems absolutely necessary today.



Robert Smithson, "Asphalt Rundown" 1969.



Lignite opencast mine, Niederlausitz/Germany.

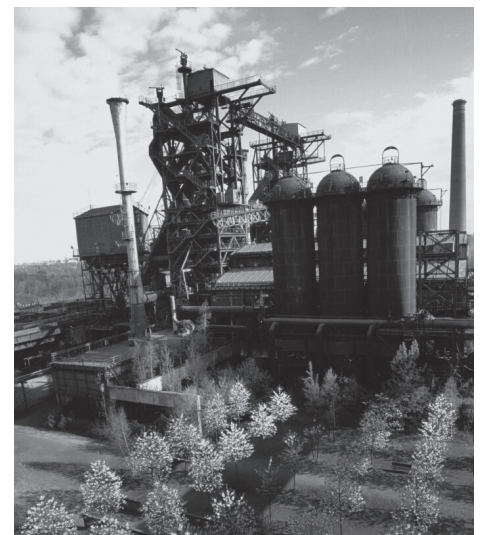
By using the terrain vague as the potential starting point and catalyst for the transformation of our approach to nature, we can challenge many preconceptions inherent to the contemporary culture of landscape design. Indeed, the terrain vague reflects the harsh realities of the present, but it has less to do with past references than with future potentials. It requires foresight and a dedicated understanding of the passage of nature, which we are experiencing at present. This is not so much about conventional landscape preservation and repair, but rather about design innovation in the face of despair. It means elevating our understanding and feeling of nature to the acute situation of the moment. In this process, we expect to be able to reveal the design language of our time, including new tools that are capable of anticipating and modulating the topological structure of our living environment in preparation for changes to come. The terrain vague marks the degree zero of our present condition, the overt expression of our natural evolution to the point of absolute reduction. But how can this be of any use to landscape architecture? Terrain vague is a place of modern brutality and environmental irresponsibility, but also one where the truth and consequence of such abandonment can be found. If landscape has always mirrored the reality of each epoch, what can be said then of the "terrain vague" as a leitmotif and starting point of times to come?

The recurring theme of the terrain vague will enable us to explore a new approach to landscape architecture that is more multifaceted and culturally engaged. Fundamental themes related to landscape modeling and regeneration will be examined, drawing elementary rules of knowledge from both present and past conditions. Themes such as topography, water, soil, vegetation, movement, acoustics and climate will be discussed within a broader evolution. Different methods of design will be discussed particularly with respect to large-scale landscape designs spanning an extended period of time. They will reveal the extraordinary progress made in the development of design tools in landscape architecture that allow us to model, quantify, visualize and simulate projects in a way that would have been unthinkable before.

With a morphological approach based on the terrain vague, we wish to give young generations of designers not only hope but also tools for possible futures. By showing a range of approaches to this problem, landscape architecture can integrate and transcend the given limitations of a place. Landscape architecture will finally be understood as belonging to a broader space-time continuum, in which a renewed balance between nature and dwelling can be achieved. The terrain vague can indeed become the starting point for new horizons. Many of the observations made over the course of history will be questioned and put into perspective. The sudden devolution and accelerated depletion of the biosphere has made us enter a new age. Some scientists have coined it as the "Anthropocene." This is an age, which follows the Holocene in which nature is regulated (or deregulated) by mankind through various modes of physical and bioclimatic effects. This understanding of the natural environment, both as a quantifiable and a controllable sort of commodity, has produced a paradigm shift in which the deeper meaning of nature and our entire attitude toward landscape has changed. This is not without consequence to landscape architecture, which is becoming one of the only disciplines capable of restoring a certain balance and quality between our advanced civilization and nature. We have moved from the hygienist theories of the last century toward the naturalist and restorative theories of this new era. What is still missing is a new cultural aesthetic capable of bridging this evolution. The "Anthropocene" cannot limit itself to a technocratic play with climate regulation and resource distribution—it must also allow for an informed culture of landscape architecture capable of contributing to the beauty, well-being and intelligence of our changing society.

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