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8

Landscape Design or the Design of the Possible?
A Critical Reflection on the Problem of “the Possible” in Contemporary Landscape Design

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Abstract
In recent decades, landscape design has moved, more than ever before, toward the prediction, control, and management of the future. Many contemporary projects seek to define, in advance, patterns of use, qualities of experience, and even the very manner in which human beings encounter the environment—prior to the unfolding of life within space itself. Through a critique of this approach, this paper argues that the fundamental problem of landscape design lies not in a deficiency of creativity or technology, but in a particular conception of «the possible»—one that understands the future as a set of pre-existing, realizable states. Drawing on Henri Bergson›s critique of the concept of the possible, and its subsequent elaboration in the thought of Gilles Deleuze, this paper demonstrates that the new does not emerge through the realization of a pre-existing possibility, but rather arises in the process of the formation of novel relations. Since landscape is neither an objective given nor a product of the perceiving mind, but rather a quality that emerges in the course of the encounter between human being and environment, it follows that landscape design should not be understood as the design of a final state or the realization of a predetermined future. Instead, it must be conceived as the opening up of conditions within which new relations, unpredictable events, and novel qualities may come into being. Within this conception, the value of design lies not in the degree to which it controls the future, but in its capacity to keep the future open and to preserve the possibility of the creation of the new.

Keywords: Landscape design, The possible, The event, Relation, Openness

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9

Is what is called "landscape design" today truly the design of landscape? Or is a substantial part of it, in fact, the design of a predetermined future?

Extended Abstract

Contemporary landscape design has increasingly oriented itself toward the prediction, organization, and control of the future. Across a wide range of urban landscape projects, patterns of movement, points of pause, modes of use, and the qualities of experience are defined in advance, before life itself has begun to unfold within the space; the success of a project is then measured by the degree to which these predictions are subsequently realized. This paper argues that such an approach is rooted not in a lack of creativity or technical capacity, but in a particular, and largely unexamined, conception of "the possible": one that treats the future as a set of pre-existing states, of which design merely selects and actualizes one. Drawing on Henri Bergson's critique of the possible, the paper shows that what we call "possibility" is typically a retrospective construction, projected backward onto the past only after an event has occurred; it is not an intrinsic feature of the future itself. Gilles Deleuze extends this critique through his distinction between the possible and the virtual: whereas the possible is an incomplete image of the real awaiting mere realization, the virtual constitutes a field of forces, capacities, and relations that, in each actualization, generates genuinely new qualities. The implication for design is significant, if the future does not pre-exist, design cannot be reduced to the realization of an already-known future, but must instead be understood as an intervention within the conditions from which the new actualizes. Building on this, and drawing on Tim Ingold's relational conception of the environment as a meshwork of movements and processes, the paper argues that landscape is neither an objective property of the environment nor a subjective construction of the observer, but a quality that emerges relationally through the ongoing encounter between human beings and their surroundings. Consequently, the event, rather than the scenario, becomes the proper unit of design thinking: while the scenario seeks to eliminate uncertainty, the event is born precisely out of it.

The paper concludes that the central task of landscape design is not to determine what landscape should be built, but to determine what must remain open, so that new relations, unpredictable events, and unforeseen qualities can continue to emerge after the project itself has ended.

Contemporary landscape design often seeks to predict and control the future in advance, as though its possibilities already exist and design merely realizes one of them. Drawing on Bergson and Deleuze, this paper shows that the new is not the realization of a pre-existing possibility, but rather the product of novel relations that emerge only in the course of the event. Landscape, likewise, is neither objective nor subjective, but a relational quality between human being and environment. Landscape design should not, therefore, be the realization of a predetermined scenario, but should open conditions within which new events and relations may come into being; the value of design lies in opening the future, not in controlling it.

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