

How my Operating System Failed

Is landscape architecture dead? I would like to suggest that it did not die but failed: the way an operating system or an old mobile phone fails. Landscape architecture reemerged two decades ago with the euphoric promise to transform the discipline of designing cities. The promise functioned as both a theoretical scheme and a practical manifesto. Borrowing language from evolutionary theory and deploying tactics from bioengineering, landscape architecture extended the city's conceptual borders and introduced the vocabulary of change to the urban environment. This expanded diction has helped architecture; some even argue that it saved architecture by giving the discipline a new means of understanding and dealing with urban context.

Landscape architecture is partly responsible for creating the conditions to theorize the city in terms of super-organic growth: constant and non-linear change affected by concurrent events and flows. The city, in other words, as macrobiotic matter. Given such an entropic reading, it is no wonder that designers are in search of tools that mediate and organize as oppose to ones that clear the ground for the creation of iconic figures—ala Classical Modernism. Landscape architecture argued for a theory of interconnectedness based on the growing volatility of complex urban problems and received a well-deserved audience. Under this regime, the contemporary city emerges as the site for the unrelenting relations between art, commerce and politics. Cities, become the expansive field of circuitry imagined by Oedipa Maas—a fragile yet robust organism to be sutured into a cosmopolitan supercomputer.

Thus, in a city that is both computer and wild grass, buildings can no longer be drawn as solitary figures on a blank ground. Streets, parks and large-scale infrastructures are necessarily re-defined as part of larger eco-systems. The zone between objects is re-conceptualized as a continuous and connected surface. Landscape architecture offers a new topological paradigm for cities with real pervasive effects. Instead of simply using metric properties such as distances between points to define urban spaces, landscape architecture privileges the way a space is assembled, connected and oriented to the rest of the city.

If landscape architecture redefined the idea of a city then how could this discipline have failed? Landscape architecture's failure has not been theoretical but

wholly pragmatic. Landscape architecture failed because while it inspired more sophisticated thinking in architecture, it did not invent new discipline-specific systems for working. Its failure, akin to that of my mobile phone, is attributable to the fact that it neither engages its own industrial memory nor stakes claim to any major idea about the future of tele-computing. Our query should look past the re-imagination of the contemporary city and, instead, focus on how landscape architecture has changed or should change, as a result, of the 21st century city? I would like to argue that the feedback loop failed and the discipline, therefore, needs repair.

The practice of landscape architecture has been unable to deliver a new organizational model whose physical structures suggest an alternative to the propertyvalue-preserving form of public urban space. The “operating system” failed because the new software we were sold is not actually an upgrade. It has neither transformed nor distorted our previously held practices. The “old version” in this formula need not be supplanted; however, a new way of thinking about the city should by necessity disturb our current ways of doing landscape architecture. The practice of landscape architecture needs to effect a sustained change on the way we represent the world and the way in which we make do among those representations.

Representations of the contemporary city have certainly been made over by landscape architecture. Two decades-worth of mapping exercises meant to examine the phenomena of change and connectivity have created a fascinating archive of the city at the turn of the new millennia. The failure, however, is that few of these new cartographies have helped produce new landscapes. The maps have, so to speak, not helped us discover new worlds. The diagrams and pictures of the contemporary city have not been translated into a new design vocabulary for landscape architecture that works strategically at both the scale of the region and the garden. The technologies of practice and perception have not been affected by the engagement with the city (i.e. a site beyond the borders of the project).

Contemporary landscape architecture for the most part still produces pastoral episodes meant to tranquilize the city-dweller. The picturesque—undoubtedly a pivotal sensibility in landscape—still dominates the organization of space in contemporary landscape architecture practice. The twin concerns of the beautiful and the sublime were brilliant aesthetic deformations of the 19th century struggle between romanticism and the brutal beginnings of capitalism. Yet contemporary landscape architecture needs to find the shape and feel of our current aesthetic ideal. How do we project today’s struggles between global finance, corporate marketing, environmental activism, urban gentrification and the wholesale

manipulation of nature through science?

Contemporary landscape architecture has not produced an aesthetic paradigm that describes the vicissitudes surrounding the idea of nature today. Modern science, the reality of global warming and the return to a new idea of the organic has redefined our idea of nature. The design of parks, waterways, urban edges and all other sorts of open zones in our rapidly urbanizing environment become the arenas for a contestation and redefinition of nature. Yet most examples of contemporary landscape architecture present sites of passive recreation in the Olmsteadian tradition sustaining the mighty stream of twenty-first century capitalism.

Landscape architecture needs to find a way of representing a place outside its own boundaries. The romantic tradition of the garden makes an extrinsic form of practice both necessary and impossible for landscape architects. It is both an obligation and a burden for the practice to create natural situations that bespeak our ecologically mediated world. The invisible structures of genetically modified foods or globally distributed energy networks move through almost every landscape project today. Brownfields are symbols of our urban reawakening yet their histories get a highgloss over by contemporary landscape architecture. I am looking for landscapes that capture the disturbing beauty of the nature we might be manufacturing in a university laboratory.

Landscape architecture needs to reassess its relationship to geometry. Topological thinking—made possible in-part because of landscape architecture—relies on a keen and passionate commitment to the relative position of figures in space, their mathematical character and the potential of transforming the urban environment through a recombination of form and program. The language of contemporary landscape architecture has neither sufficiently reframed its traditional relationship to surface nor proposed an alternative strategy. Urban surfaces today have a material character far more nuanced than the modernist plinth or the soft lawn of Versailles yet the idea of programmatic and technical thickness have yet to be thoroughly explored in terms of the new topological field. Pliability is just the beginning. It has become a condition that extends from parks into buildings and often back out onto the street but its most successful applications do not integrate the layered reality of a working landscape.

The introduction of the computer into design has been nothing short of a revolution. Computational intelligence has made it possible to rethink and transform our conventional assumptions of time and space. Information is being re-qualified and our ability to think, see and manipulate space with machines is radically

changing our experience of everyday objects. Landscape architectural practice, however, has not seized on the spatial power of this transformative phenomenon. The creation of multidimensional spaces that are warped, folded, torqued and otherwise unimaginable without the computer are routinely explored in many design practices but woefully underrepresented in the practice of landscape architecture. Why? What could a landscape architecture of the digital look like?

Landscape architecture has not evolved the necessary operational agility to manage the growing complexity of regional urban infrastructures. It reconfigured the concept of program during the Dutch revolution of the 90s by treating it as a surface to be cut and folded like sheets of paper. This introduced the possibility of reorganizing vast networks of visible and underground structures through topology. The failure, however, has been one of technique. Contemporary landscape architecture should seek to generate new performative models of infrastructural form that renew the biophysical environment while facilitating a regional understanding of market forces. Instead, landscape architecture has demonstrated a style of infrastructural programming that is more in tandem with practices of corporate branding than with the invention of new public spaces in the city. Landscape architecture has failed to embrace the technical complexity of infrastructural systems in the city as a programmatic concept with as much currency as the idea of leisure or recreation. Why? What could program become under a different regime of landscape architecture?

Like most people with a failed mobile phone, I am not giving up on communication. This Sunday, I'm taking my old version of landscape architecture back for a service check-up. I'm optimistic. I believe that this machine will be revived and retooled into a higher, more sophisticated version of itself.