

# From structures to landscapes – towards re-conceptualization of the urban condition

Lucyna Nyka

*Gdańsk University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture, Poland*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents an original approach towards the phenomena of re-naturalization of cities and indicates its possible consequences for the urban design and planning strategies. It focuses on the ongoing shift “from structures to landscapes” in understanding urban conditions. While modern architecture introduced geometric compositions against the background of nature, early modern theories of architects and sociologists started the pursuit toward a new perception of urban reality. Studies of later researchers supported by emerging philosophical re-interpretations continued questioning the oppositional character of natural and artificial, and juxtaposed the rigidity of a plan with the direct experience of urban geography. It contributed to an important shift towards understanding the city as a landscape, and consequently urbanism as landscape urbanism. The processes of re-naturalization of cities are influenced by this shift, which results in new genres of public spaces and building typologies based on the inseparability of the natural and the built.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The problem of re-naturalization of cities today is both important and complex. Cities are changing and most of them are expanding, often chaotically into suburban territories. Many are growing at a pace that could not have been predicted even one decade ago. Economic, social and cultural changes provoke mass migrations, resulting in more than half of the human population living in cities. It would be hard to suppose that the need for contact with the elemental qualities of nature, an environment delineated by meadows, forests or green hills, which have been kept for thousands of years in the most archetypical memory of human beings, will disappear with these processes. Actually, it is not hard to notice that nature is introduced and re-introduced to our cities.

The question remains though, how to find an intellectual interpretation of the re-naturalization processes and how to re-conceptualize this new condition. The ways in which nature appears in cities goes beyond solutions that could be traced back to the concepts of John Claudius Loudon, Frederick Law Olmsted, Daniel Burnham or other great masters who undoubtedly gave an important impulse to the advancement of landscape design as a creative discipline. Some forms in which nature is re-introduced to our cities resonate with the heroic land art works of Richard Morris, Robert Smithson or Walter de Maria, who revealed new territories for artworks lo-

cated between culture and nature, while stimulating the artistic and architectural imagination of the next generations.

Not denying the influence of the above-mentioned sources, this paper provides argumentation that the true shift, which has changed the forms of the presence of nature in our cities, came with the more general re-interpretations that took place at the verge of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Early modern theories of Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin or Siegfried Kracauer marked the first steps in a pursuit toward a new perception of urban reality in which the natural and the man-made started to be perceived as an inseparable whole. Blurring the borders between the natural and the built, integrating objective knowledge with direct experience and accepting the city as an active environment contributed to the conceptualization of the city as a landscape. This was a pivotal concept that opened new perspectives toward forms in which nature manifests itself today in our cities.

## 2 TOWARD “CITY AS LANDSCAPE”

### 2.1.1 *Green parks in cities*

It became clear in the nineteenth century that densely populated and rapidly growing cities demand new

solutions that focus on introducing nature into the urban fabric. John Claudius Loudon was one of the first who believed in the necessity of long term planning for providing a coherent urban system of green spaces. His plans for green belts for London and settlements immersed in nature, published in 1829, predated Ebenezer Howard's ideas and the Garden City movement for more than half a century. Almost three decades later, in 1857 Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux proposed a project for the Central Park in New York, starting the practice of leaving green areas in cities as a common value, which marked a new era in urban planning in America. Urban parks were supposed to compensate for the harshness of rapidly developing cities. Rocky slopes, vast plains and idyllic scenes were rooted in imaginary visions of rural scenarios and had to bring relief to hard-working people. In landscape planning architects paid a lot of attention to the composition of elements and the coherence of the final effect. It is important to notice however, that in their relation to the structure of the city, parks were defined as clearly delineated and usually fenced green islands surrounded by urban fabric.

This definition was to be changed for the first time in Chicago in 1893, when John Wellborn Root, Daniel Burnham and Frederick Law Olmsted for the World's Columbian Exposition redesigned the vast areas south of the city centre. A new conceptual challenge appeared – to create neither a green park nor a group of pavilions, but a coherent whole, a new harmony between built structures and re-shaped nature. A whole new environment was created: new buildings were erected, marshlands were dredged and sculptured into lagoons, and canals were cut through the city structure that led to a large water reservoir with an artificial island. The fair was supposed to be a case study for the future look of American cities, but in fact, this romantic vision clashed with common social problems and the visual chaos of a rapidly growing city (Kostof 1985). Daniel Burnham and Edward H. Bennett continued the ambitious redesign of the Chicago lakefront in 1909, proposing landfills to extend shoreline parks into the bay area, freely sketching their new boundaries between land and water. Nevertheless, with the Great Depression and political threats those plans gradually lost their impact and popularity.

### 2.1.2 Early modern theories of movement

While concepts of Loudon, Olmsted, Vaux, Bennett and other great masters still remain clearly visible in currently applied landscape design strategies, today's processes for re-naturalisation of cities have been deeply influenced by an important shift that took place at the end of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century. Interestingly, it was not focused on nature. With the emergence of early

modern theoretical concepts, architects, sociologists or even filmmakers launched the pursuit toward a new perception of urban reality – the city as a landscape. Urban space started to be perceived in motion, from the perspective of walking – a concept embraced by Charles Baudelaire and later expanded by Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin and many others. There is a strong interrelation between the specific “wandering practice” and the emergence of landscape experience in the urban environment, as Heinz Paetzold highlights (Paetzold 1998). Anthony Vidler (2000) indicates that a wanderer “sought to recapture the primal resonances of natural paths in the urban labyrinth”. Urban space resembling “volcanic landscapes” was cut with “nomadic routes” (Vidler 2000). Walking through the streets, creating new paths and discovering yet unknown places, resulted in the application of certain geographical metaphors and techniques for depicting “urban topographies”, as for example “urban mapping”. This noticeable change in the vocabulary marked a very specific launch toward the conjoined presence of the natural and the built in urban form, and also created conditions for understanding many different components constituting urban environment as one whole.

The shift toward denying the opposition between culture and nature has been related to questioning the long lasting dichotomy between objective and subjective in the perception of the city. Urban space sublimed into the notion of landscape was no more a neutral scenario but rather a concept constructed in the eyes and mind of the observer. Consequently, the act of walking through cities not only provided neutral knowledge based on purely visual stimuli but also became the source of a closer, haptic perception. Such ideas were rooted in the late nineteenth century theories of Alois Riegl, who delved into relations between movement in space and perception, distinguishing between close perception in movement – *haptic* and the static, distant one – *optic* (van de Ven 1980).

Since then, the impact that space exerts on the walking observer has become an irreducible factor in many descriptions of urban territories. It also became a fertile leitmotif in early modern cinematography, investigated at that time by such filmmakers as Siegfried Kracauer, Sergei Eisenstein, or Fritz Lang. As Guliana Bruno (2001) points out, the moving insights into the life of the early modern city, so well conveyed by cinematic images of that time, were a powerful source of experiences which made them parallel to walks through eighteenth century gardens. Moreover, as Bruno points out, “Historically, the activity of site-seeing developed largely through garden strolling, especially through picturesque gardens”. In both environments the landscape “moves” the observer, both in the literal and metaphorical sense, letting the internal and external geographies overlap (Bruno 2001). At this point it is worth notic-



ing that the eighteenth century gardens could be considered as brave experiments on achieving the unity of the constructed environment by integrating nature and architecture, often by means of in-between elements like grottos or fragments of walls.

### 2.1.3 *Modernistic compositions*

In spite of the potential of those ideas, modernism marked a strong comeback to rationalistic suggestions and solutions for urban planning that offer sober compositions of geometric blocks against the background of nature. It is true however, that a significant part of modern strategies dealt with the issue of the re-naturalization of cities. Construction on pillars left an abundance of space beneath the building, which at least theoretically allowed the nature to smoothly pass through. High-rise buildings allowed the possibility of leaving vast open spaces around, which could be conceived as green areas and aimed at compensating the lack of nature in cities. There were masterpieces built, like Lafayette Park in Detroit designed in 1956 by Ludwig Hilberseimer and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, which even today still offers a very interesting quality of life “halfway between the city and the countryside” (Del Bo 2013). On the other hand, it is important to notice that the modern approach to nature was extremely anthropocentric, as Wolfgang Welsch argues (2002). According to Le Corbusier’s declaration issued in 1925, architecture has to be a “seizure of nature by man” and “an act of man against nature”. As Welsch comments, it is one of the manifestations of the “hopelessly misguided modern picture” that could be expressed as “man against the rest of the world” (Welsch 2002).

### 2.1.4 *Environmental concepts*

While modernism was thriving and geometrically perfect plans were admired from the bird’s eye view, the quest toward blurring the opposition between nature and culture, objective and subjective, man and the environment had continued. The idea of “kinaesthetic consciousness” with the concept of the body as the centre of experience presented in Husserl’s phenomenological writings, along with the later investigations of Marcel Merleau-Ponty, formed the influential background for critical re-interpretations of the relation between human being and the urban reality. Equally important were the pragmatic theories of John Dewey. According to this philosopher, while experiencing we are immersed in the environment, not distanced from it. Dewey’s ideas undertaken later by Arnold Berleant gave impact to the emergence of environmental aesthetic in the last third of the twentieth century (Wilkoszewska 2006). Environmental aesthetics goes beyond the appreciation of the isolated object of art proposing aesthetic

appreciation of both natural and human environments (Carlson 2011).

Although environmental thinking had rather limited influence on the twentieth century urban planning, it was an important factor in the emergence and development of art in the sixties and seventies, mainly Process Art, Environmental Art and Land Art. Hans Haacke’s words can be regarded as symptomatic for artists’ aspirations of the time: “make something (...) which always looks different, the shape of which cannot be predicted precisely, make something that cannot “perform” without the assistance of its environment” (Robins 1984). Artists such as Michael Heizer, Richard Morris or Robert Smithson renounced the construction of art objects “in favour of the creation of experiences related to the environment” (Lailach 2007). Sculptures were not created as “independent configurations” but “as a way of intensifying, of making the landscape itself into another space” (Robins 1984). Heizer’s “Double Negative” project of two deep cuts through the plain of the desert invited the visitor to experience the impact of such “another space”. Artists were experimenting with elements – with massive earthen forms, geometrical shapes covered by grass, water, qualities of light, or the energy of lightening.



Figure 1. Broken Circle by R. Smithson, Emmen, The Netherlands. Photo L. Nyka

Noticeably, walking was recognised as the most sublime artistic act. George Trakas constructed “transforming passages” and let the viewers travel along articulated artistic paths. Some artists like Nancy Holt or Robert Smithson became involved in the idea of making passages through or over the aquatic pools. Smithson stressed the importance of the physical presence of water. In order to cumulate this experience in his Broken Circle project, the viewer walks along the shoreline and continues the journey along a circular structure, gradually discovering the situation of remoteness and isolation (Fig. 1). Fading paths, stones carefully arranged in lines, and cuttings through the earth for creating subdued passages marked the new forms of artistic expression. Artistic endeavours were not focused on creating art objects against the background of land-

scape but rather on making an intervention seamlessly integrated with it. Most of the works were experiments on the unclear borderline between the natural and the built. As such, they revealed original paths toward discovering new relations between architecture and nature that are manifested so remarkably today in the landscape of the city.

### 3 RE- NATURALIZATION OF CITIES

#### 3.1.1 *From urbanism to landscape urbanism*

In the last two decades of the twentieth century perception in motion, the value of connecting paths, and understanding the city as a changing environment became visible in urban interpretations once again. Researching philosophical and anthropological interpretations of everyday practices, Michel de Certeau analyses the “rhetoric of walking” and argues that making shortcuts, poaching on others’ territories, or creating individual paths could be interpreted as opposition to modern strategies dedicated to the masses (Certeau 1984). Recognising different spatial narratives has become a stimulating source of concepts both in research and education. As Vaso Trova notices, “sequencing, setting boundaries, revealing or concealing, gathering, opening, etc. are common cultural practises with strong spatial character found in all kinds of urban contexts, as well as in design projects at different scales (Trova 2008). As a result, a new set of aspirations has appeared even in the official documents issued by municipalities, as for instance: how to make a walk through the city “kinaesthetic” and “haptic” (Abbate 2005).

The idea of movement as a source of urban experience and conceptualization of the city itself as an active and changing environment has resulted in the re-emergence of the concept of urban space as landscape (Nyka 2006). This shift from structures to landscapes in understanding urban condition brings about important redefinitions. Firstly, it opens new ways toward incorporating many different factors, from environmental conditions to social and cultural forces into design project. It should be emphasized that urban planning is not isolated in this regard – the notion of a landscape is evoked nowadays in many fields of research, from archaeology to the humanities. Referring to the construct of landscape enables understanding of many facts and places, shaking them off from their analytical isolation, as Christopher Tilley argues (Tilley 1994).

In effect, elements of nature along with their visible and invisible influences are discovered as valuable components of urban landscapes, and they are being re-introduced to cities. Sound, as an integral component of any environment, is consciously integrated into architectural forms (Borucka 2015). Wa-

ter appears inside to support the elemental qualities of architecture (Nyka 2007). Natural and built integrate in conceptually new ways, challenging the long-lasting opposition between culture and nature. Accepting the integration of natural elements and the man-made structures in urban design contributes to the formation of hybrid landscapes. Urbanism transforms into landscape urbanism and becomes a powerful notion. It is based on the assumption that there is no juxtaposition of the object and its environment – they are intertwined into one inseparable whole, being a part of both, a cultural and environmental context. Consent for the open coexistence of the natural and the built in the constructed urban landscapes gives new insights into the idea of re-naturalization of cities.

The ongoing process of re-naturalization manifests itself in different layers and can be seen in many scales, both in urban planning and design strategies, and also in original design solutions for buildings. This issue has a long tradition of research carried out within the Master Programme design studio in the Faculty of Architecture, at Gdansk University of Technology in Poland.

#### 3.1.2 *Buildings as landscapes*

Students have answered the question of topographic characteristic of the built form on the basis of individual design concepts. In many cases public spaces of buildings have been conceptualized as paths, spread between interior and exterior, organized as the connecting lines that lead the observer through different environments. Projects have been focused on investigating the characteristics of the interior pathways, the way they constitute public space of the object, and relate it to the surrounding. One of the basic findings was that the organization of spaces along the connecting lines dissolves the boundaries between inside and outside.

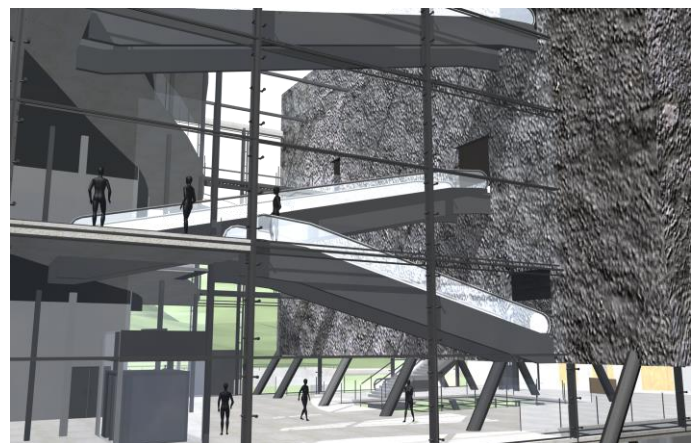


Figure 2. Shi-ga Museum. MA diploma project, author: P. Szewczyk, supervisor: L. Nyka. Gdańsk University of Technology

With unclear contours between the inside and outside, buildings are designed as landscapes. Walking through buildings becomes parallel to walking through geographical formations – valleys, plateaus, or passes (Fig. 2). Greenery is allowed to pass through interior spaces, architectural structures merge in their composition with the tectonics of land, interweaving with natural elements. This reference to the characteristics of landscape is fully inter-related with the search for haptic qualities of architecture. In the Himalayas Expeditions Museum project, the visitor is gently guided along stony walls, exposed to wide openings directed toward the high mountains scenery. Then the way continues among topographical formations, including the icy climbing block located in the hall (Fig. 3 & 4). In such a situation the building is not only located in the environment, but takes its sense from it. It is shaped to encompass the surrounding and invites it to the interplay with simple concrete walls.



Figure 3. Himalayas Expeditions Museum. MA diploma project, author: M. Skołucka, supervisor: L. Nyka

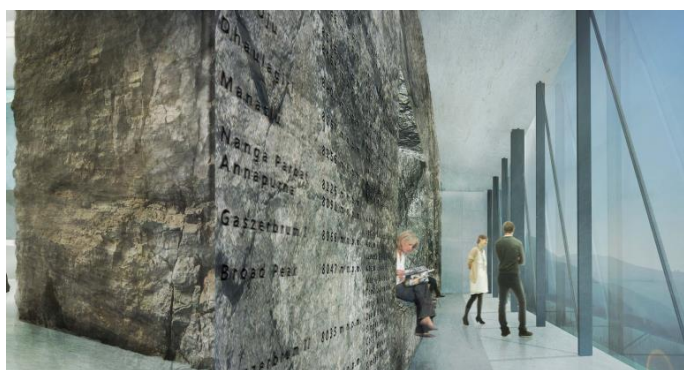


Figure 4. Himalayas Expeditions Museum. MA diploma project, author: M. Skołucka, supervisor: L. Nyka. Gdańsk University of Technology

While these kinds of architectural experiments have initially been implemented predominantly in situations with open landscape, they are gradually being introduced to cities. A good example of this is the design proposal for the Design Factory, which is to be located on the Gdansk University of Technology campus (Fig. 5). Design Factory will be a space where students can conceive, develop and implement

interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary group projects. In the presented design solution, an ascending path connects two parts of the campus and gently cuts through the green hills. This simple gesture gives the designer an opportunity to engraft into the slope a barely visible architectural structure. Cultural context, time-related programmes and environmental conditions – particularly the necessity to interconnect the existing green spaces into a coherent system – were integrated into the design concept. It is believed that the hybrid spatial characteristics of this object based on the presence of greenery that pours into the building, earth formations, and minimalistic geometry of the interior structure, will stimulate students' imagination, providing an inspiring scenario for innovative projects.

Numerous experiments on the re-naturalization of cities through architecture involve applying media and interactive technologies. It has already been proved that technology may effectively support the sensorial qualities of space (Urbanowicz, Nyka 2012). Moreover, it could be noticed that the strong urge toward re-introducing nature to cities coincides with the interest in exploring the role of media images in urban landscapes. When properly implemented they can collaborate with the environmental characteristic of buildings and urban spaces.

### 3.1.3 Constructed urban topographies

Numerous processes of transformation that take place in post-industrial areas provide inspiring opportunities for undertaking experiments on landscape urbanism. Development plans for such territories are not only focused on creating continuities of public spaces that would reconnect them with the city centres, but also on strengthening ecological systems. This gives a chance for the creative reinvention of relationships between built form and nature. These issues became dominant in the project focused on urban renewal of the former port territories located north of Gdansk on the Vistula River in close proximity to Wisloujscie Fortress.



Figure 5. Design Factory. Architectural design studio. Authors: P. Puciłowska, M. Gerszewski, R. Gajda. Studio leader: L. Nyka. Gdańsk University of Technology

The student's objective was to locate there a Media Technology Institute with a whole set of accompanying spaces both open and enclosed. The Institute was supposed to serve not only the students but also a broader community of people willing to visit exhibitions, attend some courses, or just come by while walking along the neighbouring shoreline areas.

To answer these demands different patterns of paths were sketched as a first step toward integrating various parts of the area together and relating them to the system of pedestrian circulation routes. Subsequently, the concept revolved around the ecological forces that have been shaping the area for ages. In fact, the boundary between land and water has been changing here many times throughout history, which became very inspiring. Firstly, alluvial deposits brought along by waters had been altering the shape of the riverbed, creating temporary islands and shallows. Moreover, the land was cut by differently shaped water moats built as a part of fortification systems. Those waterlines were often accompanied by monumental bastion formations. Referring to this history of changes, the Institute has been designed as a set of geomorphic volumes spread over the area, incrustated with new waterlines and a whole set of artificial islands (Fig. 6). Not only are the geomorphic forms in some way site-specific in this place, but they also do not compete with the Wislouchie Fortress. Moreover, the green areas that spread along shorelines and continue to the roofs of the buildings increase the amount of biologically active surfaces. In effect, it could appear that located on the blurred boundaries between the natural and the built a new genre of urban environment is emerging.

This pursuit of the site-specific characteristics of cities is supported by the ongoing ecological shift. There is a strong surge in urban planning to go beyond the methods of, as De Meulder (2008) expresses, "clean urbanism" – devoid of any influence of primal natural conditions (De Meulder & Shannon 2008). Today architects and urban designers are relating their projects to characteristic geomorphologies, with water flows or ecological continuities. This strategy goes beyond the idea of decorating the city by means of introducing nature.

Wolfgang Welsch warns that the oversimplified strategy of decorating the city with nature leads to failure. "Nature, or other transhuman aspects, is not to be additional ornament, but must be inherent to, must co-determine the very form of architecture" (Welsch 2002). All this contributes to the perception of a city as a site-specific construct negotiated in particular geographic and topographic conditions.

In effect, even small parcels in the city can be understood as a part of the broader ecological systems. The role of an architect is to make the environment visible by means of both built structures and natural elements. In this meaning, the environment is constantly re-discovered and re-created by the architect and urban designer. Nature is consciously and willingly involved in this re-creation of cities. This situation extends the traditional vocabulary of architects who work on artificial topographies, green corridors and passages through urban structure, or reclaim historical water canals and reservoirs. Importantly, re-conceptualizing the urban condition as landscape condition involves understanding it not so much in terms of picturesque image, but most of all as a human environment with its potential to foster creativity and to stimulate both personal and collective experience.

### 3.1.4 *Between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism*

At this point it is important to look closer at the ongoing conflict between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism – two opposite approaches relating to the presence of nature in cities. The ecological one is often criticized for its too narrow perspective, which is reduced mainly to the recovery of biodiversity and care for ecological systems. Unfortunately, as many landscape designers comment, nature is recognized within this approach in a very limited and traditional way. Environmental advocates continue to attend to an objectifiable nature that they believe remains external to culture, James Corner indicates (Corner 1999). At the same time followers of the anthropocentric approach tend to neglect natural qualities of the environment – as opponents argue.



Figure 6. Multimedia Art Center. MA diploma project, author: A. Popławska, supervisor: L. Nyka. Gdańsk University of Technology

It seems however, that no matter if the attitude toward landscape is conservative or advancing the discipline, there is a growing agreement that there is no such thing as nature; nature is being constantly transformed by man (Wilkoszewska 2006). In this context the two approaches, although different in background and objectives, may not be in direct conflict. Even with growing sensibility toward ecological values, it is hard to imagine returning urban areas to their former ecosystems. Equally hard is to believe in a convincing and culturally ambitious landscape project created in isolation from natural flows and forces.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS: NEW LANDSCAPES AND SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

We can see clearly today that we introduce to cities our concepts of nature. In urban environments we may encounter adventurous nature augmented by media images, or grafted into intermediate elements that are neither buildings nor topographies, and which are in some ways analogous to those introduced almost three centuries ago by Alexander Pope and William Kent. In the processes of re-naturalization of cities it is important to realize that there is no such thing as nature, there are different natures: naturalistic barren lands, pastoral scenes, green passages cutting through buildings and technologically enhanced ephemeral gardens. By understanding and taking advantage of this situation of an under-defined or openly defined nature, architects may shape the urban environment so it has the power to inspire us and make our lives more creative.

While the new genres of public spaces and building typologies are emerging, a crucial question appears as to how this refers to social changes. First of all, it is critical to realize that landscape does not only respond to social changes; landscape is a mirror of a changing society. Through history there has been a convergence between artistic vision of the landscape and social changes that transform cultural landscapes, as Denis Cosgrove argues (Cosgrove, 1998). Landscape is a way of perceiving the world. Landscape is a social product; it is a consequence of the collective human transformation of nature (Frydryczak 2014).

As Cosgrove (1998) points out, the idea of landscape evolved and was elaborated for a long time as a product of elite consciousness, until its impoverishment in the late nineteenth century; "The significance of landscape declined again during the period of major social change in the late nineteenth century. (...) It no longer carries the burden of social or moral significance attached to it during the time of its most active cultural evolution" (Cosgrove 1998). It seems however that this decline was rather a crisis, the unavoidable erosion marking the starting point for its

transformation and reappearance in urban conditions. Landscape appears today as an important category for the interpretation of urban spaces and a powerful tool for their integration. Conceived in different scales, it fosters the emergence of new methods for stimulating urban renewal with new genres of public spaces and building typologies based on the inseparability of the natural and the built. Nowadays, landscape can be seen in this process of reappearance as a creative environment for human activities, with its power to stimulate people and support their identity within the particular cultural and geographical conditions in which they live.

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