

Landscape as Architecture

Symposium at the Istituto di Studi Urbani e del Paesaggio (ISUP),
Università della Svizzera Italiana, Mendrisio, Switzerland
November 13 – 15, 2024
Jonathan Sergison, João Nunes, João Gomes da Silva (organizers)

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Organized by the Istituto di Studi Urbani e del Paesaggio (ISUP), the symposium *Landscape as Architecture* took place from the 13th to the 15th of November, 2024, at the Mendrisio Academy of Architecture. The event featured a lecture-style format, with 28 papers selected from over 250 submissions, curated by Jonathan Sergison, João Nunes, and João Gomes da Silva. The program also included keynote lectures and discussion panels at the end of each day.¹

The chosen theme allowed interesting possibilities for inquiry and critical thinking on landscape architecture. Presentations were limited to specific topics related to the profession, academia, or theoretical speculation. A clear requirement from the organizers was to avoid professional project presentations, focusing instead on experiences, ideas, and theses.

The mix of selected speakers reflected an effort to open the field of landscape architecture to explore diverse lines of action and research. Topics ranged from territorial approaches examining the impact of human activity on natural ecosystems to analyses of large-scale projects affecting the natural environment, particularly through extraction and landscape modification. Other presentations addressed the impact of waste and by-products from various production systems. Smaller-scale interventions were also discussed, focusing on restoring and rebalancing natural urban systems, particularly concerning water's role in ecosystems, its influence on biodiversity, and its connection to landscape construction.

The variety of presentations and speakers was noteworthy, as was the original format of the event. Each break featured a long table of local food and drinks prepared by ISUP students in the school's central courtyard, subtly stimulating participants, speakers, academics, and students to share ideas, contacts, and opinions in a more informal setting than typical conferences.

Each of the three days focused on a specific topic: "Climate Change," "Cityscaping," and "Other Landscapes," with the presentations distributed accordingly.

Among the highlights it is worth mentioning the work of young Valencian architect Alicia Crespo who presented "Rising Waters, Losing Land: Lessons from the San Francisco Bay Area for Mediterranean Coastal Metamorphosis." Her talk coincided with the severe floods in her own city, Valencia on October 29, 2024. She explored environmental transformations, projections, and strategies to mitigate flood impacts in San Francisco, offering a detailed territorial study. Crespo emphasized the need to understand the spatial and morphological relationships between the territory and the built environment, highlighting their reciprocal impacts and vulnerabilities amid significant climate change.

Andrea Oldani's work² also focused on water-related issues, but at an urban level in Italy. He presented a study featured in his latest book, proposing landscape projects as an ideal frame-

1 The full program of the symposium can be found at <https://www.usi.ch/sites/default/files/storage/attachments/document/usi-isup-flyer-landscape-architecture-programma-full.pdf> (accessed December 2, 2024).

2 Andrea Oldani, architect, PhD, assistant professor in Landscape Architecture at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies at Politecnico di Milano.

work for integrating capabilities and improving the management and maintenance processes of hydraulic infrastructure. His approach aims to address the diverse needs of cities and their inhabitants through thoughtful design.

Several other topics were presented ranging from large territorial scales to small and very detailed interventions such as the work of Alejandro Morales & Ventura Blanch,³ where the emphasis is put in the understanding, recovering, and reusing the pre-existent, vernacular infrastructural interventions in mountain towns to help in guiding rain and ground waters through paths and houses.

“The project focuses on this relationship based on a process of careful observation and comprehension of the territory by means of the delicate drawing of its water paths and their course through the inhabited rural areas. Along its route, fountains, ponds, reservoirs, and water tanks speak of the civic character of water in high mountain settlements and the transferences between agriculture and architecture that have taken place in these contexts for centuries.”⁴

Among the keynote speakers, Gary Hilderbrand (Chair of the Department of Landscape Architecture at Harvard Graduate School of Design) closed the symposium with a more somber and uncertain personal reflection, addressing the consequences of the shifting political regime in the United States. He highlighted the upheaval of the more progressive cultural paradigm, which not only affects domestic policies in the U.S., but also has a direct impact on global decision-making and discourse regarding climate change, carbon reduction efforts, and the elimination of fossil fuels. These issues, of course, directly influence planetary ecology, territories, and both urban and natural landscapes.

Hilderbrand, who demonstrates remarkable patience and openness in sharing his projects and experiences, delivered a lecture deeply aligned with the ethos of the GSD, focusing on ecology and resilience. His agenda strongly emphasized mitigating and adapting to climate change, implementing green infrastructure, and pursuing environmental justice. He also brought a more critical and action-oriented perspective, advocating for strategic interventions and projects to address urgent issues and needs.

In an interesting territorial perspective, Martina Voser⁵ Landscape professor at ETH, Zurich presented one of her latest commissions, the Bondo redesign of Bondasca in Switzerland. An area affected by a landslide on August 23, 2017, where three million cubic meters of rock and debris fell from Piz Cengalo into the Bondasca valley. The landslide buried roads, infrastructure, buildings, and killed several hikers. The project questions the role of the landscape architect in the prevention and protection of mountain landscapes, especially in areas with high instability and risk for settlements and dwellers. These risks are sometimes part of normal degradation and modification processes of natural areas, but also because of human intervention and noncontrolled use of natural resources. A set of contention walls, and the new elevated road are strategically located taking in consideration the sites continuous erosion and are designed as protective walls on the village side, adapted to the grain of the place by means of fine garden terraces, with the dam crests having a double function as connecting pedestrian accesses.

Additionally, the symposium brought together a group of theorists, historians, and philosophers affiliated with the Mendrisio Academy of Architecture. These academics played a crucial role at the end of each day, not only summarizing and articulating the diverse presentations into cohesive themes but also broadening the discussion about the scope of the profession—both in terms of landscape architecture and architecture itself. This approach fostered a richer, more var-

3 Alejandro Morales Martín, Master in Architecture by the Universities of Málaga and Lisbon; Ferran Ventura Blanch, PhD, architect by Higher Technical School of Architecture of Seville, Spain.

4 As presented in the authors' own words in the abstract: <https://www.usi.ch/sites/default/files/storage/attachments/document/usi-isup-flyer-landscape-architecture-programma-full.pdf> (accessed December 2, 2024).

5 Martina Voser, landscape architect, MaVo Landschaften, ETH Zurich.

expanded the lines of thought and action, connecting the themes to a wide array of works, authors, and perspectives to better understand the discipline's position in a contemporary context.

A particularly critical and sharp perspective was offered by Michael Jakob,¹ who has extensively analyzed and theorized the discipline. Jakob's work seeks to define the role and position of landscape architecture within today's political, academic, and professional environments.

According to Jakob the most fascinating issue surrounding the topic of landscape is that it presents an open field: every time one tries to define it, one is required to redefine it all over again; and despite the numerous schools, teachers, and researchers in landscape theory, fundamental problems persist as open questions regarding what landscape is, what landscape architects do, and what is the relation between landscape and territory.

In his book "What is landscape?", Jakob explains in depth his point of view about the discipline:

"A history of landscape architecture – [...] after almost two hundred years of practice – is still lacking. The historical sense is underdeveloped within the discipline, both in teaching and in the professional practice. It is not a matter of knowledge in the field of history of art or gardens or other related disciplines; what we really lack is the historical knowledge of the profession and the way it contributed to the transformation of the world. Everything leads to believe that landscape architecture is still afraid of connecting its current practice to what predates it. The discipline evolves – inside frameworks and isolated national traditions – piece by piece, creation after creation, in a disparate and discontinuous way. The lack of theory and of general visibility, the ongoing confusion between landscape and nature, landscape design and environmentalism, landscape and territory, represent the evident external price to pay for this worrisome state of things. The internal price is, if possible, even more onerous: it consists in the naive repetition of automatized actions and the poverty of the formal patterns at work in too many contemporary projects, but great examples of the past and those that come from other cultures – parallel traditions – are, however, not lacking. They should be finally fully acknowledged."²

In another discussion day Matteo Vegetti³ questions what is the work of the landscape architect in contemporary society? And proposes that such work is to interpret in a hermeneutical approach the meaning of space. The work, according to Vegetti should be the one of observation, recognition, interpretation, revealing, in a way in which the architect puts the invisible on the same level as the visible. And what is the goal? maybe it is no longer the traditional one, an art of altering and adapting the territory to human use, but one about raising another sensitivity which is to allow the landscape to speak by itself, to overcome the contradictions crossing the territories. Shifting from the traditional concept of landscape as a visual experience, as a feature, as a presentation or an external relation with the reality to another concept proposed here: "Landcare by design" with practical consequences related to healing the territory both physically and culturally.

Another concept argued by Vegetti is that of "critical zone." Here "critical" refers to territories which are fragile, which need to be protected and cared for. Critical is also the importance of the thin, fertile topsoil layer on which all life depends. This "critical zone" is not registered at once, because it's made out of large amounts of territories, cultures, histories, issues. It is also critical the way in which landscape studies should be involved in politics, much more than today. In this sense a task for "Landcare by design" may be to be more politically engaged, even more so in the current political scenario. And this shift evolves together with the meaning of aesthetics, which also must evolve, as Landscape Architecture is no longer a framed view of a

1 Michael Jakob, professor in History and Theory of Landscape at hepia (Geneva); professor of Comparative Literature (Chair) at Grenoble University, and lecturer of Landscape Architecture at Harvard GSD.

2 Michael Jakob, "What is Landscape?," *Series Babel* (LISt Lab, 2018), 151.

3 Matteo Vegetti, philosopher and psychologist, aggregate professor of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Space at the Academy of Architecture (USI-ARC) in Mendrisio, and professor at Supsi of Theories of Space and Living (Supsi-Dacod).

ied dialogue, situating each topic within a specific material and speculative context. Often, they expanded the lines of thought and action, connecting the themes to a wide array of works, authors, and perspectives to better understand the discipline's position in a contemporary context.

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landscape as representation, but rather the interpretation of the relationship between the anthropic and the natural, the agricultural and the city. Aesthetics need to become a practical tool, an operational concept, a process to look for the goal of the profession.

Finally, the remarkable work of João Nunes and João Gomes, both Portuguese architects with a long trajectory in landscape architecture practice and academia should be highlighted. From the symposium organization, through the introduction of each one of the speakers, the articulation of each one of the talks, and the summaries and remarks to close each day with a sounding summary of all discussions.

Without a doubt, it is enriching and highly refreshing from a cultural standpoint to witness a confrontation of ideas that challenge the role of Landscape Architecture as both a profession and a theoretical framework. Such discussions question its role, its level of influence in decision-making, its profile, and, broadly speaking, the definition of a profession that, in my view, is still relatively young and remains in the process of constructing both its theoretical and practical framework, as well as its position and role in the contemporary exercise of the profession.

