

Année du Jardin 2016 à Lausanne

6 et 7 octobre 2016

Colloque

« Quels jardins pour la ville d'aujourd'hui ? »

Espaces libres : entre identité et imaginaire

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The Geography of Imagination: Atmosphere, Experience and Other Slippery Stories

good day, it's a pleasure to be here.

to begin with a few words about our office, studio vulkan. we are 4 partners and about 40 people in zurich and munich. we work a wide range of scales. we build a lot, do urban and regional studies and focus often on the open spaces of the city's periphery, since so much of switzerland is not urban but disperse sprawl in the landscape. we have become increasingly interested in the many roles which landscape plays in our lives, from physical space to psychological space to atmospheric space. which is what i will speak about today.

the title of this colloquium is The City as Garden. if we look at the history of gardens they have always been primarily about experience. in fact, compared to architecture with it's defined uses and spatial programs, open space has, since time immemorial, primarily served such elusive needs as delight, rapture, daydreaming, drifting and social voyeurism, be it through imagery, movement or engaging the senses.

perhaps cities have too. and this is perhaps their connection to gardens.

cities have long been a source of surprise, wonder, the strange and unexpected. but increasingly these qualities of cities and their site specific uniqueness are being replaced by the generic. more and more new urban open spaces begin to scarily resemble sterile, standardized architectural renderings.

studying our own projects and building sites, we've begun to see aspects of atmosphere and experience as central criteria for "the good city". how can our projects become catalysts of the imagination?

where do engagement and atmosphere lurk and what of them can be consciously designed?

the discussion around atmosphere is mostly theoretical such as in this image from a recent book accompanied by a plea for planners to put more atmosphere in our projects. thanks for the tip. but our project sites don't look like a romantic sepia photo of 19th century paris.

so in the kitchen of our studio we search for ingredients or tools which help us to grasp and work with atmosphere.

we recently tripped across two terms which british writer alastair bonnet uses in passing but which sum up our intentions: the geography of imagination and geographical reinchantment.

this lecture is about 5 practical things we've learned about atmosphere, experience and the possibility to pur enchantment back into our geographies:

Spatial Atmosphere: Design of Spatial Sensation

sculpted space guides the body. with a heightened awareness we physically sense space. the phenomenologist christian norberg schulz describes how this experience is grasped in prepositions. we design with these little words.

the focus of our designs lies not in the design itself but rather designing worlds of spatial sensations.

(Canton High School Wil) here a high school for 700 high school teenagers. what do they like to do in open space? lounge, hang out, meander looking for the right social situation, trade school notes, kiss...

our response: 20m long landscape lounge sofas lying in a field of gravel. the velvety surface lures one to lie **upon them**. the usual relation in open space of grass as a backdrop and paving as social gathering space has

been reversed. the historic gravel pit of the site forms the garden backdrop with various social pillows to drift **between**. even small modulations of 40cm offers a differentiated spatial world.

Atmosphere Underfoot: the Ground on Which I Move, Moves Me

the groundplane is the foundation of spatial experience. it carries and guides our movements, can speed up or slow down our goal-oriented hectic movements of everyday urban life. some historic gardens, as in this japanese zig-zag bridge, played with our feet centuries ago, activating our sense of kinesthetic movement.

(Katzenbach Plaza) here a tiny plaza for 700 residents of a housing development. the dense array of uses and paths melt optically with broken light and shadow, dissolving rational approach to moving from A to B, allowing residents to lose themselves briefly in thought. children use the pavement as a playmate and game.

(Housing Towers Wiedikon) the renovation of the open space for these 1970's housing towers was a further exploration of paving as a generator of spatial experience. only minimal weight was allowed on this 1970's underground parking. not only were we therefore required to build a paper thin landscape but the courtyard was mostly seen from the above as a 2-d graphic.

since we had to design a paper thin landscape we used the infamous 1970's wallpaper designs as starting point. seen from above the new graphic sets the architecture in strong visual and physical relation to the open space. but from below, the graphic unfolds into a 3-d space which animates a wide array of uses: the paths, green spaces and raised edges all become games for sports or stillness.

Atmosphere of the Mind: Open-ended Stories

the western spatial tradition based mostly in hierarchical, rational clarity. preinterprets space for us. other traditions, such as this work of isamu noguchi or y twombly are non-hierarchical, non pre-interpreted. our eyes roam the surface repeatedly creating a new interpretation and experience with each viewing.

(Wildwood Plaza) as in these woodland clearings. in shrinking landscape territories on the edge of town we increasingly long to be instantly immersed in the sensation of nature or in this case woodlands.

these plazas are designed like a cyclorama as a circle. have no front or back, no center or focus. nothing to

see but filter of tree trunks in front of your eyes, above your head. three woodland clearings just 100 meter apart yet with completely contrasting characters, the imagery of each an expression of their specific history and conditions.

the first plaza lies below a cathedral of enormous beech trees – baudelaire's "temple of living columns" the site escaped hurricanes on this protected side of hill.

the second is a jungle of pioneer beeches where storms razed the woods completely.

the third, a strange, apocalyptic scene of deformed nature fighting to survive catastrophies. tree root balls thrown into the air, branches growing straight into the air in an attempt to survive. here the storms has thrown nature around.

just places to sit and watch the woods grow.

Social Atmosphere: the Vis à Vis

historic villages around the world are being run over by sprawl. the result of renovating the historic central squares often becomes an even more faceless, generic places lacking in lively social exchange.

(Redesign of Historic Center Zollikon) here a study we won for the renovation of a town center near zurich. in this village the historic town square, visabel in city plan, was rebuilt in the 1990's. two restaurants, a historic one and a new one in the new town hall, felt so bad here that they barricaded themselves behind bushes hoping to create a sense of intimacy. we realized in a successful plaza one doesn't go to there to stare at the plaza itself, but to see as many happy people as possible enjoying themselves.

so we created a new tool we call the vis a vis, or in german das gegenüber. we tried to maximize the view corridors of liveliness and happy people. using secondary means to link the lively spaces. a fountain, a new cafe, shade,

(Redesign Münsterplatz, Weingarten) this central, historic plaza in germany is the site of many parades and festivities. it lies at the foot of a well known cathedral loved by tourists. the steeply sloped asphalt surface filled with depressing furniture and parking was avoided by the tourists.

the design uses a single gesture to enliven the plaza as well as give spatial meaning and clarity to the site. a platform clapped up from the slope creates two new differentiated spaces: the platform creating an intimate ensemble with the historic building and chestnut tree and the new triangular, sloped plaza for happenings.

these two spaces become, depending on the event, stage and tribune, or in german bühne / tribune. an inversible social system of enlivening.

Atmosphere of Time: Constructing the Ephemeral

open space design is not only about constructing place but working with the ephemerality of nature. in a series of projects we explore time, transformation even decay of nature.

(Toni Factory school of the Arts Rooftop Garden)

this is a factory converted to school of the arts in an industrial area of zurich. the design for enormous series rooftop gardens had only about 100 constraints and had to be built in no time. they became highly unnatural places.

the constraints led to an extremely rational system of design as production. instant gardens were pre-cultivated in boxes which began the choreographed process of decay on opening day.

the boxes, used to construct earth mounds where trees had enough earth to grow, are taken over by the creeping plants and fall apart.

people become part of the process. we did visual monitoring the space with a photography student for 6 months to watch the social and natural cycles of transformation.

(Sound Barrier Wall, Zurich. work in progress) to finish, a competition for artists which we were able to win. in switzerland a new law requires sound barrier walls where highways pass housing, dividing the city spatially where the goal should instead be to integrate the infrastructure into the neighborhood.

we looked for a poetic re-interpretation the usual negative connotations of urban infrastructure. for the 800m long wall which forms the western entrance to zurich we chose glass, using the metaphor of a window and curtains for the design of the wall. the glass panels are etched to varying degrees. the blurred glass collects, abstracts and juxtaposes the projected and fleeting imagery of city life and nature in all of its moment by moment transformations.

a dynamic wall painting of the site specific surroundings in real time. changing conditions of