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30 Years Back

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The ambition to look back 30 years in time confronts us with the specificity of landscape architecture compared with other disciplines, such as art or architecture. Most products of landscape architecture mature, and as trees are a classic ingredient, this maturation in fact easily coincides with a timeframe of 30 years. To understand 30 years after completion as a moment of evaluation means to look at projects not only with a historical interest, but with fresh eyes, as if they are finally ready to be judged. However, following John Dixon Hunt's *The Afterlife of Gardens*, this is a shift of perspective that touches upon more than maturation alone. [1] Thirty years is also the timeframe in which the design loses its position as the principal source of information about the project. As Hunt argues, design intentions, the designer and design drawings start to fade away as bearers of truth at a certain point, and what arises are the strata of appreciation by those who use public space, speak about it and remember it. And almost without exception, in a timeframe of 30 years, designs erode and often surprisingly quickly simply change or disappear. New programmes are accommodated. Design decisions are re-discussed, and approached within new constellations of power.

This issue certainly must go back to Parc de la Villette. Both the competition and the realized artefact are meaningful, in many ways. Parc de la Villette is in itself an important, if not *the* important project, of the 1980s. Its competition with over 800 entries, the innovation in representation, the novel position of the park, the newly defined positions of landscape architecture versus architecture, and the discussions it has evoked ever since all make it a crucial project. *But what is it, today?* That is the question posed in 'Under the Sky', and ironically, by two authors who were barely born when La Villette was conceptualized.

While La Villette suffers from piecemeal management, many landscapes designed in the 1980s have disappeared altogether. This is the case for Harlequin Plaza, IBM Solana and NCNB Terrace, three North American projects discussed by Marc Treib. After the 'dark shadow over inventive landscape design in the US' cast by Ian Mc Harg's *Design with Nature* in the 1970s, Treib claims, the 1980s seemed to be a decade that welcomed back complexity of form and spectacle. These three corporate landscapes raise the question of how we should deal with the legacy of the recent past. Should we try to maintain the material artefact, as in the case of La Villette, or should we accept that these outspokenly photogenic landscapes end up as a product of the mediatized society that came into being in the 1980s, nothing more than flickering images on a computer screen?

Both La Villette and the landscapes discussed by Treib are exemplary in their depiction of the new design challenges faced by landscape architects and urban planners in the 1980s on an unprecedented large scale: abandoned former industrial sites at the city's edge and an accelerating territorial dispersal of the city. In addition to re-examining what landscapes designed in the 1980s have become today, this issue of *JoLA* aims at tracing the social, political, economic and environmental context of 30 years ago. OMA's design for the Haarlemmermeerpolder, the subject of Christophe Van Gerrewey's article, both celebrates and criticizes the so-called Dutch Polder model—a model that works on a spatial, socioeconomic and a political level—by stretching it to its limits. The grid-like structure of the polder landscape would become the armature for a diversity of (often contradictory) programmes and architectures, erasing the difference between culture and nature. In this sense it is the predecessor of other influential paper projects by OMA in the 1980s, such as Parc de la Villette and Ville Nouvelle Melun-Sénart. OMA's designs of the 1980s, with their indifference towards (landscape) architectural form seem to follow a radically different design strategy to the corporate landscapes described by Treib. However, in OMA's work, landscape form leads the design on a larger scale: the strips of La Villette, the grid of Haarlemmermeerpolder and the 'Chinese sign' of Melun-Sénart.

One of the great designs of the 1980s, integrating an outspoken interest both in form and in the development process, is the Parc Départemental du Sausset, designed by the late Michel Corajoud and constructed in 1981. Fabio Di Carlo wrote an article that is both an eulogy and an in-depth discussion of this exceedingly important project. It is an early example of a peripheral park on a large scale, integrating rural fringes, suburban settlements and infrastructure. Although it was based on the evolutionary dynamics of the park and had a strong ecological sensitivity that inspired many of today's designs, its overall structure is characterized by a formality that anchors it in the history of French landscape design. This combination of ecological sensitivity and design attitude was very rare in the early 1980s, as Sylvie Van Damme demonstrates in her analysis of landscape conceptions. She argues, along with Marc Treib, that there was a sharp division between the proponents of ecological planning and those of design. For the 'ecologists' form was a logical outcome of adaptation to ecological processes, while landscape architects believed that active intervention in these processes was necessary from an aesthetic and experiential point of view. Van Damme argues that the landscape conceptions of the 1980s should be re-examined in order to use landscape as a truly holistic concept in planning, policy, management and design.

30 Years Back unavoidably addresses the image, including drawings. Not only did the technical and material production of images change fundamentally, but so did the systems in which we share, exchange and perceive these images, altering our basic concepts of 'visual argumentation'. 'Thinking Eye' contributes a kaleidoscopic view of the last 30 years. Academics and designers from various backgrounds and geographies were invited to choose and comment on an image they considered influential to their individual practice and research in landscape architecture. The selections of Luigi Latini and João Nunes suggest that the craft of hand drawing is as valid today as it was 30 years ago, or even more valid, as it is now also appreciated as a strong statement. At the same time, digital techniques have evolved, enabling the creation of drawings that propose different representational strategies.

With a different format than usual, the book review section presents three short essays that discuss a selection of books that were instrumental in the development of landscape architecture in the 1980s. As noted by Elizabeth Boult, it is exactly in this decade that a substantial number of books started to contribute to the theoretical foundation of the discipline. The books proposed by Boult, Philippe Nys and Thorbjörn Andersson also disclose specific language regions—apart from English, also French, Danish and Swedish—and will certainly be recognized by some of the readers as crucial books on their own bookshelf.

Is it significant that 30 years ago most countries in Europe were slowly leaving a crisis behind, and we seem to be doing the same now? Looking back, we can see that the crisis climate of the early 1980s was very fruitful in terms of ideas and concepts and, at least in some countries, the very idea of landscape architecture itself. The discipline was emancipated at a high speed. We may not be able to judge if the same will happen in our time, but why not take an optimistic viewpoint, and in the end conclude that looking back 30 years invites us to look forward to a promising future?

Notes

1 Hunt, J.D (2004), *The Afterlife of Gardens* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).