

Chapter 3

Four Trace Concepts in Landscape Architecture

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Might landscape architecture become the one and only environmental panacea of the next century? Looking at etymology, this is what the French would like to suggest. The word *paysage* means landscape (as in land and countryside) and much more, conveying qualities that are both visible and invisible. It refers not only to issues of environment and ecology but also to the mood of an entire nation, to its changing sense of identity and cultural belonging.¹ There is thus a deep sense of temporal continuity (both historical and inventive) that pervades the idea of landscape in France.

Yet most design interventions by contemporary French landscape architects focus on environmental conservation and restoration. The work is seen as a significant ameliorator of ecological damage and urbanization. It is, therefore, not surprising to find the notion of landscape recovery central to this field of action because it implies a focus on people's concern with the quality and image of their immediate environs. It is possible, however, to broaden this sense of recovering landscape, invoking cultural and imaginative horizons rather than limiting it to strictly environmental concerns. A recent spate of design competitions and projects in France has enabled such a broader practice of landscape to be developed.

Some of the more interesting French *paysagistes* have used these opportunities to demonstrate a critical and innovative range of ideas at both local and international scales.² As a practitioner and teacher based in France, I am interested in those methods and techniques that might expand the landscape project beyond the simple amelioration of sites toward practices that also reactivate the cultural dimensions of sites. In particular, I am interested in how one recognizes sites through design, especially in reaction to the general state of environmental and cultural amnesia that characterizes our time.

French landscape design theory is unfortunately not at the level of the questions that are asked of practitioners today.³ It is precisely this void, this absence of

Fig. 1. Pierrelaye, Le Parc des Six Arpents, Christophe Girot, 1990–1996. Landing: In a wasteland where there is a decrepit old wall, a breach in it could become a key element in the design of the park. The breach operates as a hinge between the old village and a new housing district. Photograph by Christophe Girot, 1990.

a clear and demonstrable theory of landscape architecture, that explains why most French practitioners have chosen a rather intuitive and experiential approach to design. The age-old opposition of nature and culture, so central to French landscape design theory since the times of Descartes and Le Nôtre, has in fact become a much more complex tangle of interrelated phenomena. Despite Alain Roger's valiant attempt to oppose the two yet again in a superb Manichean treatise on contemporary French landscape philosophy, it appears that current landscape practice in France no longer sees the relevance of such clear distinctions.⁴

In the course of my own work I have unraveled four operating concepts that serve as tools for landscape investigation and design, especially with regard to recovering sites. These I call *trace concepts* because they cluster around issues of memory: marking, impressing, and founding. They also underline the fact that a designer seldom belongs to the place in which he or she is asked to intervene. How can outsider designers acquire the understanding of a place that will enable them to act wisely and knowledgeably? This is the question my four trace concepts address; landing, grounding, finding, and founding each focus on particular gradients of discovery, inquiry, and resolution. Each concept also designates a specific attitude and action that in turn nurtures a process of design and landscape transformation.

The demonstration of the role and efficacy of trace concepts can be verified directly only in the field of action. The specific site functions like a partition or container for a muse who may, through design, reveal hidden aspects of a given place. The partition requires that the order in which the four trace concepts are presented remains unalterable. Landing, grounding, finding, and founding must follow sequentially so as to enable the site to emerge in a comprehensible manner. The primary purpose of this highly intuitive and experiential approach to working with sites is to draw as much as possible from the potential of any given place and to assess which existing landscape elements might be of real significance for the design yet to come.

The notion of a landscape element escapes precise definition. On the one hand, a site element may be a physical entity that reveals certain characteristics of the place (stonework reveals geology, weathered surfaces reveal use and climate, ruins and foundations reveal past occupation, stains reveal floods or seepage lines, and so on). On the other hand, a site element may refer to something imperceptible but nonetheless significant (a past event, a local story, or chronology, for instance). This inclusive approach enables a designer to blend direct

physical experience and intuition with local research. The important thing is that attention is always focused on what already exists in situ. In this way, the designer may carefully and knowledgeably assess what really needs to be recovered (anew) from the relentless erosion of time (Fig. 2).

Landing

Landing is the first act of site acknowledgment, and it marks the beginning of the odyssey of the project. Landing usually invokes displacement and change of speed (as in arrival), but it also conveys the idea of touching ground and reaching for the confines of an unknown world. It describes the specific moment when a designer still does not know anything about a place and yet is prepared to embark on a lengthy process of discovery. Landing, therefore, invokes the passage from the unknown to the known, from the vastness of the outside world to the more exact boundaries of a specific project.

Landing thus requires a particular state of mind, one where intuitions and impressions prevail, where one feels before one thinks, where one moves across and stalks around before seeking full disclosure and understanding. In this sense, landing must induce a sense of complete displacement and outsidership to be really effective. The idea of tapping the hidden energy of a place by playing the innocent outsider is beautifully evoked by the author François Béguin: "The exit from the humanized world, whether voluntary or involuntary, enables the recovery of vital forces led astray or left dormant by society."⁵

Landing refers also to the moment when a designer reacts to the difference between his or her preconceived idea of a place and the reality that appears during the first steps of a visit. Often, one comes to a site with a set of ready-made impressions and opinions. It is precisely this juxtaposition of preconceptions and the act of initial discovery that may generate a fertile tension in the initial stages of design. During landing, nothing is allowed to remain obvious or neutral to the designer; rather everything is apprehended with wonderment and curiosity, with subjective and interpretative eyes.

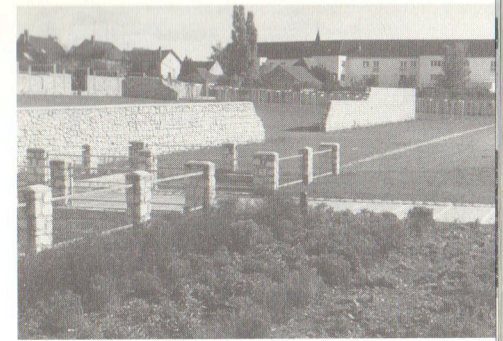


Fig. 2. Pierrelaye, Le Parc des Six Arpents, Christophe Girot, 1990–1996. Landing: What could first be perceived as the collapse of an old abandoned structure becomes a precious relic for the future. Photograph by Christophe Girot, 1990.

Landing also refutes the idea of a *tabula-rasa* approach to site design, where nothing can be learned or retained from a given site and where everything can be resolved by detached conceptual thinking. The moment of landing is, in fact, so important that every detail, no matter how slight, counts. Even the question of how one enters the site is of prime importance. It matters, for instance, whether landing occurs “properly” through a clear and determined sense of arrival, or “improperly” by stalking across brambles, wastelands, and broken fences. The state of just-landedness is precarious, but it plays a vital role in the genesis of design. Initial landing provokes impressions and insights that often last through the entire design process.

There is almost an idea of relativity in landing; one might argue that circumstances change at every moment and that the perception of a place can never really be twice the same. The sense of entry and landing is, therefore, personal. It escapes clear scientific methodology and is almost always the result of chance. Landing is an event open to the elements and to the seasons, to all the customs and risks at large. It is, in fact, a living manifestation of the experiential potential of a site and thus has potent spatial and psychological effects on the subsequent thinking-through of the design project.

The individual’s sense of landing is what matters most in the beginning, and it is precisely this ontological trust in initial intuition that needs to be restored and nurtured. By analogy, this might be compared to a first encounter with another person. It is more meaningful to engage directly with that person, through conversation and eye contact, for instance, than to spy on him or her from afar and simply gather information from other sources. In this latter instance, the final encounter with that person will carry with it many preconceptions, whereas direct and immediate engagement remains open, empathetic, and sets the stage for future dialog.

Grounding

Grounding is the second step in landscape discovery and understanding. Grounding has to do with orientation and rootedness, both in the literal and figurative sense of the word. The difference between landing and grounding is essentially linked to time and moment. Landing only happens once, at the beginning, immediate and distinct, whereas grounding recurs indefinitely. Grounding is more about reading and understanding a site through repeated visits and studies. The site contains both a residue and a promise; its surrounding context, its soil, climate, water, ecology, and history are unique and special. Thus, grounding

has less to do with the individual imagination than with careful research and analysis. It is like a probe into the successive histories of a place. I cannot think of a better example than the site of the Fontaine des Innocents in Paris to illustrate this point through antithesis. This is a place that has irreparably depreciated its ground to the point of no return: its only trace of memory can be found through excavating into what few layers still remain below the ground (Figs. 3 and 4).⁶

Grounding is a process implying successive layers, both visible and invisible. Sometimes the most important aspect of a given site is almost intangible. It is not necessarily what remains visible to the eye that matters most, but those forces and events that undergird the evolution of a place.

Finding

Finding entails the act and process of searching as well as the outcome, the thing discovered. It is both an activity and an insight. What is found can result from either a surprise discovery or some painstaking, methodical quest. Thus, it is rather difficult to speak of a method of finding because different activities yield different discoveries. Such discoveries may be tangible, like a relic or a significant tree or stone, or they may be more evanescent, like the death of a significant person. What is found is the *je ne sais quoi* ingredient that conveys a distinct quality to a place. As such, findings escape design invention and import; they are something unique (though hidden) that definitely belongs to a place and contributes durably to its identity.

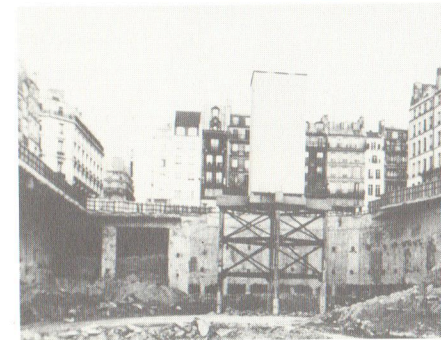


Fig. 3 (top). La Fontaine des Innocents, Project le Forum des Halles, realized by the City of Paris. Grounding: A vast urban crater where the city of Paris irretrievably lost its ground and all its memory. Even the solitary Fontaine des Innocents, perched on its spike of earth, has lost any significant relationship with its surroundings. This is the best contrary example of grounding, where the historic heart of Paris lost all rootedness. The absence of grounding here provoked a most destabilizing environment, and all subsequent designs have suffered or failed for that reason alone. Photograph by R. Liot, 1972.

Fig. 4 (bottom). La Fontaine des Innocents, Project le Forum des Halles, realized by the City of Paris. Grounding: During excavation, the ground reveals all the old layers of soil from the oldest cemetery in Paris. The old Renaissance fountain, raised on steel stilts, sits quietly inside a wooden box. Photograph by R. Liot, 1972.

The act of finding is also something that can be performed and experienced by everybody discovering a site for the first time. What people actually find can be an integral part of the landscape structure, like a breach in a forest, a fault on the side of a hill, a spring surging from the foot of a wall, a narrow street plunging down toward the sea. But finding is not limited to the discovery of objects; it also includes the experience of relating and associating ideas, places, and themes. Few projects can control and manipulate the process of finding because of the importance of chance and indeterminacy in discovery. Thus, what is found is an open question, an open possibility.

Finding is the alchemical component in the design process; it may be permanent or impermanent, the result of a fleeting vision or some resounding echo. Finding usually discloses the evidence to support one's initial intuitions about a place.

Founding

Founding is probably the most durable and significant of the four trace acts. It comes at the moment when the prior three acts are synthesized into a new and transformed construction of the site. Founding may be either conservative—referring to some past event or circumstance—or innovative—importing something new to a place. Whatever the case, the act of founding is always a reaction to something that was already there. The solution can be as ephemeral as a stage set, or it can take place gradually over an extended period of time.

Founding can be also understood as bringing something new to a place, something that may change and redirect a particular site. Examples range from the placement of a new object, to the framing of some new point of view, to simply changing the use of a particular place. Each

Fig. 5 (top). Invaliden Park, Berlin. Christophe Girot with Atelier Phusis, 1992–1997. Finding: Traces of an old military church in the trench axis of the wall. The military park of the Prussian Invalids in Berlin had several important traces to offer—unexploded bombs from the Blitz, old contorted trees from the time of Kaiser Wilhelm, huge slabs of concrete from defunct Vopos barracks, etc. But it was clearly the buried foundations of the bombed-out military church that conveyed the most fecund meaning about this site. Photograph by Christophe Girot, 1996.

Fig. 6 (bottom). Invaliden Park, Berlin. Christophe Girot with Atelier Phusis, 1992–1997. Finding: An inclined wall with a path joining the divided city glides above the ground. To find relics of the old Prussian church, one must run down the wall into the ground. The wall is an allegory of twentieth-century Berlin. Photograph by Christophe Girot, 1997.

act of founding corresponds, in archeological jargon, to an epoch—a given period in history when a cultural relationship to the landscape evolves and changes. Founding inevitably happens each time something new occurs, staking out the ground for future events. Still, it would be wrong and rather cynical to place all newly founded projects on the same level; a well-founded project remains clear in its approach and resolution, extending the legacy of a place toward a productive future.

Conclusion

Each time a landscape project begins there should follow an extended period in which one may simply discover what already exists, most of which will not be obvious or quickly ascertained. The introduction to a site project has all too often been reduced to systematic and quantitative formulas for analyzing the site from a distance. By contrast, trace concepts enable designers to come to grips with their intuitions and experiences of place, allowing these impressions to direct the unfolding of the project. I am quite aware of the intrinsic limitations of this kind of approach, which might best be summed up by the statement of phenomenologist/geographer Yi-Fu Tuan that “So much emphasis can be put on the individual as maker and perceiver that the external world loses its objective standing; reality ‘out there’ seems to be only a human construct.”⁷

Fig. 7 (top). Pont de l'Alma, Paris. Founding: The spontaneous shrine that appeared at the site of Princess Diana's death. It is not the product of any particular design; it is the direct result of the emotional charge given to the place by the people who visit and mourn. Photograph by Christophe Girot, 1998.

Fig. 8 (bottom). Pont de l'Alma, Paris. Founding: New meaning on an old monument formerly dedicated to the Statue of Liberty. The flame monument was already there, but since the death of Princess Diana it has taken on a completely different meaning. The settling of meaning in a place sometimes completely escapes the control or intentions of a designer; sometimes it all comes down to a matter of fate. Photograph by Christophe Girot, 1998.

Augustin Berque, in his short essay on the origins of *paysage*, wrote of a similar thought:

In this manner, European modernity looking at “nature” as an object, has torn it up into two incompatible modes: on the one hand there is what our senses reveal to us (*le paysage*), on the other there is what is to be learnt from science (*la vérité*). It is precisely this rift which still prevails today in the contradictory ambivalence of the word *paysage*.⁸

It is, therefore, most important to accept equally the two modes of thought that exist in our culture. The recovery of landscape will begin only when we are ready to reconcile our senses with our science.

Notes

- 1 In the introduction to his book, *Court traité du paysage*, Alain Roger underlines the articulation between the word *pays* and the word *paysage*, which is almost paralleled in English by the words *land or country* and the word *landscape*. I say almost, because the French words convey an aesthetic and experiential dimension that does not pertain in the English vocabulary. See Alain Roger, *Court traité du paysage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 8. See also his earlier *Nus et paysages: Essai sur la fonction de l'art* (Paris: Aubier, 1978).
- 2 See Sébastien Marot's essay “The Reclaiming of Sites” in this collection. The most important consideration in this essay focuses on the notion of the primacy of site, which is central to the theoretical discourse most current in French landscape practice today.
- 3 In the introduction to their book titled *Le Jardin art et lieu de mémoire* (Besançon, France: Editions de l'Imprimeur, 1995), 17–18, Monique Mosser and Philippe Nys decry the absence of a strong body of theory in French landscape architecture and garden design today: “The prevailing absence of theory and clarity in the French world with respect to garden art today, together with the possibility that such a subject offers to the renewal of cultural meaning, is allied with a general pervasive condition of emptiness and malaise. This condition can precipitate and give rise to digressions where almost anything is allowed. Against such digression, landscape architects ought to reclaim a place they have long ago deserted: garden art. There is an urgent need to recover a distinct and renewed meaning for garden art, albeit not entirely separate from what is more generally understood as contemporary art; that is to say, the recovery of poetic meaning.” (Translated by Christophe Girot.)
- 4 In a short treatise, Alain Roger relentlessly refutes the Germanic notion of deep ecology by means of the French notion of landscape aesthetic. See Alain Roger, “Maitres et protecteurs de la nature,” in *Court traité du paysage*, 145–164.
- 5 Quote translated directly by Christophe Girot from the original text: “La sortie, volontaire ou involontaire, du monde humanisé conditionne la récupération de puissances vitales que la société avait détournées ou mises en sommeil.” François Béguin, “Vagues, vides, verts,” in *Le Visiteur N°3* (Paris: Société Française d'Architecture, 1997), 67.

- 6 See Christophe Girot, “La Fontaine des Innocents,” in *Les Carnets du Paysage*, ed. Pierre Françoise Mourier (Arles: Actes Sud, 1998), 44–64.
- 7 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Segmented Worlds and Self* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 151–152.
- 8 Translation directly in the text by Christophe Girot: “De ce fait, la modernité européenne a déchiré ‘la nature’, dont elle faisait ainsi l’objet de son regard, en deux modes incompatibles: d’un côté ce que nous en révèlent nos sens (le paysage), de l’autre ce que nous en apprend la science (la vérité). C’est cette coupure qui se reflète encore aujourd’hui dans l’ambivalence contradictoire du mot ‘paysage.’” Augustin Berque, “A l’origine du paysage,” in *Les carnets du paysage*, ed. Pierre Françoise Mourier (Arles: Actes Sud, 1998), 137–138.