TOPOGRAPHICAL STORIES
Studies in Landscape and Architecture

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While I have never doubted that buildings can and should be expressive, figurative, or communicative, I have always thought and remain convinced that architecture's modes of disclosure are different from those of painting, theater, and film, to say nothing of advertising. Or, putting the matter more forcefully, the modes of disclosure proper to painting are inadequate to architecture's ways of making itself significant, even if buildings sometimes deploy and display pictorial motifs.

The following premise states the basis for my counterposition as directly as possible: buildings are always built somewhere. This laconic statement can be helpful in reversing the tendencies that render architecture increasingly less significant in contemporary culture. Although this term opens a wide range of issues, it immediately suggests the limitations of an architecture that presents itself as scenography, and reminds us of the importance of construction and location, topics pictorial architecture often neglects in its market-minded attention to surface and "free-signifiers." Over the years, and in the essays revised for this book, I have tested the premise that reflection on the material (constructed) and spatial (situated) characteristics of terrain—concentrated in gardens and expanded in landscapes—can help architecture rediscover modes of disclosure that are just as significant as image articulation, perhaps even more so, or more basically so.

Concern for terrain means more than an interest in geometry (the profile, compass, or configuration of a given plot of land), it means care for the materiality, color, thickness, temperature, luminosity, and texture of physical things. Further, land is not only soil, it is all that can be discovered beneath it and emerges from it, as well as the several agencies that sustain that emergence. Attention to the qualities of these elements naturally leads to an interest in their associations, and thus to their expressive power—even their potential for representation. But concern for the physical aspects of land can also lead to an awareness of its functional potentials, what the materials of a site can do, how they can act or perform in service of some purpose other than expression or representation. Attention to the performative aspects of landscape also invites recognition of its expected and unexpected events, the latter revealing the limits of both foresight and design intelligence, which can be disastrous in some cases, wonderful in others.
Further, while land is obviously physical, it is also clearly spatial. There is no reason to deny or to neglect this, even if the perspectivity of the typical approach tends to favor frontality and pictorialism. Attention to the spatial aspects of a place—its enclosures, continuities, and extent—can also lead to interpretations of its potentials for occupation and use, which are not only or not essentially pictorial but practical.

In addition to the material and spatial aspects of the land there is a third characteristic that is even more fascinating for architecture, its temporal quality. Seen over time the materials of landscape continually renew themselves. A site's metabolism is key to its capacity for continued relevance. Time is also the medium of one's experience of landscape, for terrain is known most fully in the duration of spatial passage or movement. Temporality opens a wonderful dimension of architectural sense. In sum: landscape is important to architecture because attention to the materiality, spatiality, and temporality of terrain shows how alternatives to the pictorial approach can increase architecture's cultural content.

This is to say that the turn from architecture toward landscape enables one to reconceive the role that buildings play in a wider cultural context. Landscape and architecture are ways, or can be ways, of constructing culture, of giving the patterns of our lives durable dimension and expression. In their expressivity gardens and buildings resemble other forms of cultural production—poetry, philosophy, or politics, for example. The practice of these two arts, like that of the others, assumes criticism: creative thought proposes alternatives to existing arrangements once the latter have been judged to be inadequate (inadequately useful or expressive). In architecture there has been much criticism over the past few decades of buildings that were designed and built as isolated objects. Many have argued against the view that a building can be internally defined, can be conceived (in full) without reference to a given location. The alternative proposes that relationships between buildings and other configurations in their vicinity are decisive. Variants of this alternative range from those that use design to conserve or affirm what predates the project, to those that modify given conditions, to those that see design as a form of critique. Reworking the old analogy between the building and
the body, many critics have explained the development of “object-buildings” as an evidence of modern individualism. The loss of public space was related to the loss of public life because introverted private lives had eclipsed both. Such is the thesis advanced by Richard Sennett in *The Fall of Public Man*, for example. The philosophical foundation for this argument, however, was established outside architecture, urban theory, and sociology.

For the architecture of the past several decades the decisive contribution of modern philosophy has been the argument that existence is necessarily relational, that the person defines him or herself with respect to or in dialogue with others. What was true for the person was taken to be true for the building. To cite only the most well-known argument about the person’s essential engagement, Martin Heidegger stated that human existence is always situational (sein ist dasein). This is the primary condition, even if “authentic” life is experienced in moments when the situation releases its hold on the person. Hannah Arendt’s arguments for public life as the horizon of a person’s full maturation advance this same basic premise. Human freedom is experienced within, not apart from, what she called “the space of appearance,” the public realm. Likewise, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, citing Saint-Exupéry, ended his major work with the following lines: “man is nothing but a network of relations, and these alone matter to him.” Freedom flounders when it fails to realize that without the person’s anchorage in the world actions and decisions would lack the context that endows them with meaning. Many other philosophers could be cited along these lines (Martin Buber, Emmanuel Lévinas, Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, for example), all of whom argued for a renewed understanding of the person as a being-in-the-world. Existence, on this account, is always caught up in a richly textured weave of practical, ethical, political, and aesthetic reciprocities. The primary task of thought is to discover and name the relationships between people and things within several horizons of reference. Proposed here is a horizontal spread of relationships, a landscape—urban or rural—that integrates diverse institutions and situations. Yet situatedness is also, and essentially, historical. This can be called its vertical dimension. The critique of “presence” undertaken by the thinkers just listed has led to an elaborate and
fascinating vision of the “active” character of things and places, their temporality and historicity, or, adopting Jean-Luc Marion’s neologism, their “eventmental” reality. Accordingly, for landscape architecture and architecture, attention to the actual phenomena of their projects has come to mean concern for their enactments, for the emergence and disappearance of things, which means also their contingency, not their (presumed) stability, independent identity, and “objectivity.” The word used most often for the milieu of this contingency is “context.”

For architecture, the argument for context, for redefining the architectural object as a constituent of a wider milieu, has meant rethinking the building’s engagement with its material and spatial surroundings, whether built or unbuilt. This has also meant “weakening” the object, perhaps even “secularizing” it, for with a renewed sense of the way the context envelops the building, in all its senses, and an increasing reliance on the reciprocal strategies of fragmentation and appropriation, the discipline has undertaken a slow but steady retreat from the utopian rhetoric and salvational promise of early modernism, which placed so much of its faith in the (built) object’s redemptive power. Now we seek not a world of architecture but an architecture of the world. Here again, landscape provides a framework for architectural thought because it is inescapably ambient, or, as I have come to call it, topographical.

My sense of this last term is wider than conventional usage which equates topography with the land. Topography incorporates terrain, built and unbuilt, but more than that, for it also includes practical affairs, or their traces, ranging from those that are typical to those that are extraordinary. An example of the latter, described in Chapter 2, is the verdant landscape around Richard Neutra’s Kaufmann house in the barren sands of the California desert. Topography so conceived is certainly physical, but is legible as such by virtue of the ways that footprints on its shores invite, sustain, and represent the many and varied performances of everyday life. One offers it continually makes is of traces of past performances that have sedimented themselves into its fabric. Marks of this kind are not exactly vestiges, for that would suggest they indicate only something that occurred in the past. Were this all that topography made available, both the present and the future
would be foreclosed. Topographical inscriptions do, indeed, give evidence of previous enactments, but they also indicate those that are still occurring and may unfold in future. A trace is an outline, a proposal, that is taken up in an act (of making or inhabiting) that has no obligation to its past other than the preservation of a tension between its forms and those projected out of the present. Movement along a single path, from here to there and now to then, is a very simple but vivid indication of this tension, of a spatial situation that allows the opposites that define it to continually oppose each other. Understood in this way, topography is not only expressive or indicative but also relational, a mosaic integration of the contrasting settings that give life its texture, richness, and spontaneity. Perhaps the term integrated diversity can be used to characterize this aspect of topography.

Chapter 1 describes the Neurosciences Institute in La Jolla, California, by Tod Williams and Billie Tsien as an example of such a topography, insofar as it integrates previously unrelated aspects of the landscape in an "earthwork" that both recalls and reveals ways the land can accommodate practical affairs.

Although articulated and articulate, topography does not require steady attention, nor does it continually obtrude itself into one's awareness. Its tendency is just the reverse, to recede in order to sustain the interests of everyday events, which are only occasionally aesthetic. Thus defined, topography is not exactly what is commonly meant by landscape, nor is the term architecture adequate; instead, it structures the premises each of them elaborates.

My purpose in extending the meaning of this term is to describe the milieu that gives these two disciplines their basic affinity. Architecture can discover its topographical sense if it acknowledges essential aspects of landscape phenomena: material variation, temporal unfolding, recessive potential, and an unmatched capacity for unexpected figuration.