

REVIEW

Another Green Agenda: A Review of *The Modern Architectural Landscape*

The Modern Architectural Landscape, Caroline Constant, Paperback, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 300 pages, numerous illustrations in black & white, 2012, ISBN: 9780816676354

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Anyone who has ever set out on the trail of Andrea Palladio in Veneto or Friuli, travelling lightly but well-informed, may well have consulted the *Palladio Guide* (1985). Caroline Constant's compact 'guide' from the 1980s probably proved a helpful *vade mecum* for many, directing them, as it does, to those less spectacular and hidden of his buildings often overlooked by large-format illustrated volumes. This little book is now available in five other languages in addition to English, including Japanese. On her journey into sixteenth-century architecture, Constant displays an interest, carried over into the volume reviewed in this paper, in the profound portrayal of concrete objects, woven into a fabric of text enriched with aspects of society, culture, social policy and, not least, the history of theory.

The Modern Architectural Landscape is the fifth book to be published by the author, who is today a professor of architecture at the University of Michigan. Once again, as suggested by the format and the complete lack of colour, but most clearly evidenced by the sixty pages of notes and the often stamp-sized illustrations, this is not a coffee-table book. Neither, however, is it a 'history' all of a piece, but rather, for the most part, a compilation of essays by Constant already published, some abridged, some revised, with the oldest from 1987, only two years earlier than Constant's first book publication. Also, *The Modern Architectural Landscape* is not an alternative 'green' history of architectural modernism, if we take this to mean something like a 'white modernism' which would need to be supplemented by garden and landscape narratives. In the nine main chapters of the book, Constant focuses on projects whose architecture is very heterogeneous and which date between 1920 and 1980. Accordingly, her analyses, each between fifteen and thirty pages long, can be seen first and foremost as the expression of a consistent, pertinent publication activity. Kenneth Frampton even went so far as to extol this as a book which 'architect aficionados of landscape design have long been waiting for, written by a critical scholar who has devoted the best part of the

past twenty years to a progressive analysis of the interplay between modern architectural form and the landscape' – a quotation which, naturally enough, adorns the back of this soft-cover book. In fact, these essays were published over the course of several years not only in such renowned journals as *AA Files* or *The Architectural Review*, but also in anthologies that have been influential in landscape architecture of recent decades; for example, in *Denatured Visions: Landscape and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, published in 1991 by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and in Jan Birksted's *Relating Architecture to Landscape* from 1999. Constant herself has already published a monograph on the Stockholm Woodland Cemetery (1994), which appears in this collection; her more recent essay for Charles Walheim's publication on Lafayette Park in 2004, which has also found its way into the book, demonstrates that she has been making a name for herself in this domain for decades.

By no means can her essays be said to be outdated. The interested reader, if he only realises what this book is, must therefore be grateful to have these essays now collected and in some cases revised in these three hundred-odd pages. Constant examines in meticulous detail various architectural projects, located in Europe and North America except for Le Corbusier's Chandigarh, not only going into the history of a particular project to fathom the impetus underlying the design, but also, in most cases, classifying it in terms of the overall work. In so doing, she relies on a similar text structure – a brief exposition and conclusion, often accompanied by a pithy final statement that adds the final spice to the complex, expansive body of text. In this process, she occasionally unearths surprising photos of models, historical photos or sketches of projects that are essentially familiar, which pleases the expert, even if the emphasis is not on 'pretty pictures'. Constant only includes them as part of her reasoning. The design of the book goes along with this intention and presumably aims to ensure readability, which is, for instance, why the illustrations are always placed correctly in relation to the text. The margin column, however, only provides space for the captions. The density of cross-references is accordingly high. Constant not only wants to examine the pro-

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ject history behind the design analysis, but also, by means of cross-references, to take into account theoretical background information from various discourses conducted in the fields of architecture and landscape architecture. The result is that in places the comments section takes on a life of its own; its references quite comprehensively span the theoretical history of landscape architecture of recent decades, a side benefit for anyone wanting to fill gaps in knowledge of this area. One also learns the occasional historical detail, for example, how landscape design was established at Harvard, or biographical notes on various architects, which, while detracting from the thread of the main text, nevertheless satisfy the readers' need for thoroughness. It may therefore not be advisable to read the book in one go, from the first essay to the last; nor does the author recommend this kind of reading. Nor, perhaps, may everyone be as interested in Mies van der Rohe's 'Barcelona Pavilion as Landscape Garden', the second essay in the book, as in the fifth exposition entitled 'A Landscape "Fit for a Democracy"', in which she focuses on Jože Plečnik's modifications of Prague Castle, a symbolic part of the formation of democratic Czechoslovakia between 1920 and 1935.

That such choice is available, however, demonstrates the broad field of historical topics covered by the essays. It might be likened to drilling down into specific sites in modernism – regarded as a long twentieth century – in the form of selected projects. In addition to those authors of projects already mentioned, the authors of selected projects include, in the order of their appearance in the book, Erik Gunnar Asplund, Sigurd Lewerentz, Garret Eckbo, Ludwig Hilberseimer with Alfred Caldwell, and finally Rem Koolhaas/OMA. On the whole, the choice of projects appears to be due to the fact that this is in a sense Caroline Constant's 'collected essays', obviously written for particular occasions. Anyone who hasn't read the preface religiously might be tempted to ask what happened to Richard Neutra or Alvar Aalto, among others, whose position is commonly seen as exemplary of the unity of the building and its natural setting. An initial glimpse at the table of contents, however, reveals an astonishing, if not complete, list of dramatis personae. Plečnik is a figure of the nineteenth-century Wagnerian school who does not seem to fit in quite as seamlessly with the others. Garret Eckbo appears in this succession of 'big' names, too. Although a student of Walter Gropius when Gropius was chair of the architecture department in Harvard in 1937, Eckbo is traditionally counted among the great American landscape architects of the twentieth century. Once again, one might ask, what about the other three in this eminent foursome: Daniel Kiley, James C. Rose and Thomas Church? However, the book does not defer to this kind of classification, and so it is not worthwhile to judge it by this. After all, it's no secret how such promising book titles of 'panoramic' ambition come about; on the other hand, how could a single person manage the encyclopaedic treatment of a 'modern architectural landscape' as a single connected book? Such comparable publications as *Open to the Sky* (2003) by Malene Hauxner, who died last

year, or Janet Waymark's *Modern Garden Design* (2005) are also attempts at a synthesising examination based on specific projects. Only a few authors have accomplished any kind of 'synopsis' so far, for example, Hanno-Walter Kruft (1994), on architectural theory, or Clarence J. Glacken (1976), on landscape theory.

Constant essentially writes about architects and their architecture, even if she goes so far as to encompass a detailed description of the plants used, their impression, their scent, their seasonal dynamics. She thus develops her expositions of landscape architecture – never of the garden – consecutively, based on the logic of what one might designate a contextual architectural design. The incipient academic entrenchment of architects and landscape architects at the end of the nineteenth century is not expounded in any greater depth but instead forms the starting point of her deliberations when she writes: 'In the best of these projects, the architectural concept derives in significant ways from that for the landscape, despite any difference in authorship that this might entail' (Introduction, p. 22). The often tense relationship between these two professions today, in which the landscape architect tends to feel that he has been consulted too late, cannot, of course, be appeased by a design practice, which Constant sees as a necessary unity. In fact, it is precisely this kind of capacity to unify design tasks that she is willing to consider. As a consequence the book tells stories of exceptional figures in architectural history.

One of the most accomplished expositions deals with Lafayette Park in Detroit. Here the author examines the relationship between the architect (Mies van der Rohe), the urban planner (Ludwig Hilberseimer), and the landscape architect (Alfred Caldwell) in connection with the quality of the project as it was finally built. Constant derives her criticism above all from the failure to respect outside space, which Hilberseimer had intended to be a contiguous area. According to Constant's interpretation, the separation of private spaces was to take second place to the sense of community, which was thwarted by the building typologies and landscape interventions carried out by Mies and Caldwell. She even comes to a final negative judgement of this pioneering urban development project in post-War America: 'It lacks the type of synesthetic, cognitive experiences that would enable residents to interrelate and forge a collective sense of place through active engagement' (p. 189). The title of this penultimate essay, 'Intersecting Ideologies in Lafayette Park', however, refers to a more pressing issue than the division of professions, which cannot be historically undone. Once again, she assiduously develops the background of the urban development, Hilberseimer's idea of a 'Settlement Unit', Alfred Caldwell's origins in the Prairie School, and his closeness to the project partners as student, book illustrator for Hilberseimer's *The New City* and *The New Regional Pattern*, and later colleague at IIT. And yet she is arguably most concerned with the central political issue, when urban revitalisation took on a new form funded by private developers as a result of the Housing Act of 1949.

According to this interpretation, in which the author places the main emphasis on the political agenda of 'landscape', this is more than a remarkable compilation of sundry essays. After expounding the design idea with the aid of ample compiled material, the author arrives at interesting conclusions in each essay. For example, in the case of Lewerentz, who Constant attests to having increased 'the spiritual essence of daily life' (p. 92) when his Memorial Ground at Stockholm's Woodland Cemetery – where the ashes of the deceased are spread upon a forest field without discrimination – transforms traditional religious symbols and rituals into an immediate 'experience of nature'; or when she observes of Asplund's library building, whose outdoor areas he refined for another competition, that he positions 'architecture as a middle ground between "nature" and the city' (p. 76). But what, then, is the other, synthesising theme of the book?

Three of the nine expositions and the lavish introduction were written specially for the book. These appear to bookend the other texts to such an extent that Constant seems to be taking up a 'position' as if retrospectively, albeit on the basis of many years of experience. And this is perhaps where she writes *one* book, beyond the requirements and constraints of texts published disparately. Thus the new chapters are intermeshed. The first new chapter is on Sunnyside Gardens, which is compared with the European development based on the Römerstadt settlement in a subsidiary topic (urban development for socially disadvantaged sections of the population). Another new chapter is on Garrett Eckbo's work for the Farm Security Administration (housing for job-seeking farm workers). The concluding, equally new, essay is on Koolhaas's contribution to one of the most important projects in the latter half of the twentieth century, the transformation of a vast former slaughterhouse district into the Parc de La Villette in Paris. All of these new essays focus on the political dimension of landscape, which was equally present in the older texts, if not as distinctly developed. But now the author sets out in search of a 'democratic landscape'. It is this interpretation that causes the introduction to the book to adhere to the project descriptions. In the introduction, Constant traces the theoretical history of landscape, quoting from Denis Cosgrove's seminal essay 'Landscape and Landschaft' from 2004 to construe that a political agenda is inherent particularly in landscape. In the subtext of the book, 'landscape' then appears – by dint of the fact that it is not an object, but rather involves processes and dynamics of interaction – as that sphere of design in which 'democracy' must be fulfilled. And so Constant draws on Cosgrove to argue against the understanding of a 'scenic landscape' as embodiment of political power in favour of a more performative.

Constant's exposition of 'La Villette', which she situates in the Experimental Architecture of the 1960s and 1970s, does not follow the other project descriptions in chronological order; rather, with it she seeks to reconcile theory and landscape. This also explains why the book concludes with the unbuilt runner-up project from the

1982–83 competition. With logical consistency, she takes something that was not built – which may appear paradoxical for the book as a whole – to illustrate how the difference between building and 'context' could be nullified, with architecture and landscape entering into a process of questioning these 'modern dichotomies'. Constant thus interprets Parc de La Villette as the attempt to achieve a 'democratic landscape' and, at the same time, as the conclusion of a development lasting more than a hundred years, culminating in earlier projects such as Olmsted and Vaux's Central Park (1857–61) or the neighbouring Parc des Buttes Chaumont by Adolphe Alphand (1861–67). She maintains, however, that in these projects is manifested the paternalistic treatment of park users, the perpetuation of class differences even in park design, with these parks being the expression of an 'ethics of social betterment' (p. 219). Constant observes that Koolhaas, in contrast, by projecting his 'social condenser' from *Delirious New York* onto four hectares of Paris, 'reflects a moment outside utopia where architecture, landscape, and the political could potentially overlap' (p. 222). For Constant – not without some euphoria – this project objectifies the concepts of 'performativity' and 'effect' (p. 225) that are still of central importance in theory today, in a pioneering understanding of landscape architecture as an urbanistic programme of the future. That the mention of ecological questions or other mundane tasks, such as the placement of wind turbines, albeit of vast significance for the 'cultural landscape', are crammed into the two-page afterword or not even tackled, is in a way more than pardonable. Are these not *the* current ubiquitous topics facing the discipline, to which publication after publication is dedicated almost on a monthly basis?

The Modern Architectural Landscape is not a theoretical feat in its own right, but rather a sometimes brilliant and complex synopsis of various moments in architectural history; a series of accounts of how distinguished architects understand the design of landscape as part of their job. Taking in the publication bit by bit it's not only highly informative, but also enjoyable. Rarely has landscape architecture and landscape been expounded as substantially.

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