

A Ten Point Guide to the Formless in Landscape Architecture

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one

In literature, fine art, poetry and music, content can be understood as what is communicated, while form has usually referred to the 'container' - how something is communicated. Poetry, for instance has many forms: epic, sonnet, haiku, lyric and so on, by means of which the poet expresses a range of cognitive and emotional considerations. However, the separation of the work into content and form has often been regarded as spurious, since these elements are interwoven, or interdependent. The interrelatedness of form and content is readily appreciated when we think of the decisions and techniques involved in the organization of constructed landscapes, the nature of the terrain that is being organized, and the situation that prevails with respect to that terrain.

Nevertheless, in landscape design there has been a privileging of form over content that has tended to lead to a typological framing of program. To consider the future organization of a terrain as potentially park, riverside walk, ecological corridor or urban square can limit the way we think about, and then organize, the conditions at our disposal. Further, it can even blind us to the latent functionalities, strange beauties and ambivalent intersections that may already exist within the heterogeneous continuum of a particular landscape. We are all alert to the dangers of smoothing out challenging complexities in order to create another homogeneous urban park.

two

Georges Bataille wanted to get beyond the form / content duality which seems to come ready-made, and which organizes all things into container and contained. He argued that there is a condition that is not simply unformed, like the clay waiting for the potter's hand, but which is prior to any consideration of form and content. This he called the *informe* or formless. Bataille's formless is an attempt to deconstruct the form / content duality. It asserts a revaluation of things that have been repressed or forgotten or discarded, left out, left over; waste, the excessive. 'The things that homogeneity obscures.'¹ In some ways the formless actually highlights the interdependence of the homogeneous and the heterogeneous.

Bataille identifies four categories within which the notion of the formless moves:

Base Materialism

Base Materialism is a major category for Bataille, its aim is to create or form non-idealised matter. Bataille saw matter as being 'non-logical difference'

Horizontality

Horizontality is a reaction to the dominance of verticality within the modern art world and general society, the horizontal is about expressing the form of the fall from high to low.

Pulse

Pulse acknowledges the temporal qualities that are often repressed within art. The pulse is related to change and time and repetition which are fetishized in landscape architecture

Entropy

Entropy describes a process which moves from order to disorder. Like pulse it has landscape attributes such as growth and deterioration that are inherent to any landscape.²

¹ Coombes, Daniel (2007) *Changing the Channel on TV*. Unpublished BLA thesis.

² These are Coombes (2007) definitions.

Landscapes may be considered in terms of these categories. For instance, the areas underneath motorway fly-overs possess the illogicality of base materialism, in that they exist outside the systems of urban design and transport planning. Like Serres' *Parasite* (see *The Ten Point Guide to Disturbance*) they express an irrationality that actually inhabits the protocols of urban design. Another example is the extreme horizontality of the landscape understood as field, in contrast with the object-hood of architecture as vertical element.

three

The idea of the formless entered fine art theory and practice and was codified in the 1997 book *Formless: a user's guide* by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss. Bois and Krauss also discuss another discourse in critical theory that is relevant to the formless in landscape architecture, known as the abject. Best understood in relation to the body, abject art assaults such 'totalizing notions' as identity and order. It investigates these categories through works that relate to bodies and representations of the body, exploring particularly the ideas of object and subject and the relations between these in traditional discourses of the body and its functions. For instances when substances move from inside the body to outside of it (are expelled or excreted) they become abject, or enter a state of abjection. The abject can therefore be seen as an operation of making something excessive, unnecessary. The relation between the formless and the abject is of interest because they both participate in an outsider status and all the implications of exclusion. The abject can be thought of as a state of being cast off: "it exists in between the concept of an object and the concept of the subject; something alive yet not."³

A number of land artists in the 1960s worked, consciously or unconsciously, with the formless. Robert Smithson developed a number of early pieces in which he attempted to permit unmediated conditions to appear. For instance *Asphalt Rundown* (1969) where a load of asphalt was dumped from a truck into a quarry near Rome, Italy, and *Glue Pour* (1969), in which glue was permitted to pour over a terrain.

Michael Heizer, a land artist who has worked consistently with large remote landscapes in the American west, states 'When you are making a sculpture by digging out dirt, you're negating all these materialist concepts. You change the definition of material and material usage, and you redefine what an object is.' Discussing his standards for sculpture, Heizer continues: 'The criterion was earth-moved sculpture, period. All domestic material. Nothing imported. No gravel, no wood, no concrete, no metal. Just dirt.'⁴

four

In 1996 Spanish architect and urbanist Ignasi Sola-Morales published an article called 'Terrain Vague' in the architecture and design journal *Anyplace*. He described terrain vague as an urban landscape condition that enjoys an ambiguous and uncertain status. Areas abandoned by industry, railways, ports, by the suspension of residential or commercial activity are 'spaces of freedom and memory.' They are residual spaces, often found on the banks of rivers, and even include garbage dumps and quarries. Sometimes access to them is restricted for what he calls 'theoretical reasons of safety and security.'⁵ Just as the nineteenth century city required large parks these vacant, unproductive terrains that are without clear limits and which have no 'future horizon' are demanded by our culture as a critical weapon against the ordinary and the productive. They should not be reintegrated back into the city. This void, this lack, says Sola Morales, should be saved at all cost.

five

'The problem for all those who seek to show, bring or let be the formless, is transposition. For something to stay outside the world of form requires that an object remain a process, disabling the imposition of form at all stages. Arguably this is impossible, and that is

³ Taylor 1993.

⁴ Quoted in McGill 1990: 11.

⁵ Sola Morales 1996

its interest: the attempt can only ever fail, and this failing is formless / informe (the same could be said of attempts to theorize or demonstrate the formless).⁶

The main issue for all who work with the formless, then, is avoiding form. This is the paradox of transposition. Transposition is an act of mediation. Bataille gave up working with art as a medium to investigate the formless precisely because he felt that art is, by definition, a transposition. Attempts in art practice to show, uncover, or let be the formless could not escape being brought into form. Bois and Krauss attempt to avoid transposition, using the operation of alteration, which they define as having 'no essentialized or fixed terms.'⁷ Hegarty, above, states that in order to 'stay outside the world of form requires that an object remains a process.' Coombes works with process and with the operation of alteration in his landscape architectural investigations of the formless, with mixed results. He finds it difficult to dissolve all connections between his work and the 'designed city,' suggesting that even a landscape that succumbs to uncertain and unmotivated process cannot avoid being reconstituted as an object. In design, he concludes, mediation is impossible to escape. The very fact of design presupposes mediation.

six

Sola Morales' notion of terrain vague (TV) evokes many aspects of the formless. This kind of 'empty space' is apparently a physically unmediated environment within a mediated one (the city). As Sola Morales describes it, it is a waste product of the city and therefore, in a sense, not transposed. He says that we should treat such residual spaces with 'a contradictory complicity' that will not 'shatter the elements that maintain its continuity in time and space.'⁸ It requires of landscape architects that they think of design in an unmediated way with, as Coombes puts it, 'an intent to undo both physical and conceptual form.'⁹ However, Coombes goes on to say that even terrain vague is a type of form. While it is conceptually unmediated within the discourse of landscape architecture it does not, and cannot, reflect Bataille's notion of the formless. Even the vacant lot, after all, is formed matter.

seven

There are two projects for landscape architecture then. The first revolves around the question how to involve terrain vague in its design discourse. The second is how to use the notion of the formless in design process. A few landscape architects have attempted to work with terrain vague. Fewer have attempted the latter challenge. For instance Montreal landscape architect Luc Levesque wants to find a middle path between seeing terrain vague as requiring reincorporation into the urban field, and romanticizing it as a disconnected territory of emancipation. He wants to move beyond the order / disorder, form / formless designations that it conjures. In an attempt to address the first question above – the involvement of TV in design discourse – Levesque reformulates terrain vague as interstitial space and foregrounds materiality.

How can we move beyond these sterile arguments, which appear to limit the issues raised by the 'terrain vague' to an all-out struggle between order and disorder? To establish a hypothesis – 'the 'terrain vague' as material' – is to try to approach the issue by another path. It is to place in parentheses the qualities usually connoted by the 'terrain vague' – whether debasement or emancipation – in an attempt to capture the conceptual and experiential dimensions, like so many substrates that might feed the eye and the intervention.

In this way, shifting from factual observation of the vacant lot to the more abstract concept of interstitial space expands our perspective to include a range of notions apt to stimulate discussion, whether linked directly to the 'terrain vague' or not. Etymologically, interstitial denotes something found 'in between' things. Referring to the notion of interval, it also means 'a space of time'. Thus the interstitial embraces not only such notions as openness, porosity, breach and relationship, but also those of process, transformation and location.¹⁰

⁶ Hegarty 1999.

⁷ Bois and Krauss 1997: 245.

⁸ Sola Morales 1996: 123

⁹ Coombes 2007

¹⁰ Levesque 2001 HOUSE BOAT / OCCUPATIONS SYMBIOTIQUES, Hull/ Gatineau, AXENÉO7, pp.6-7. An earlier version of this article appeared in Paysages, (newsletter of the Association des architectes paysagistes du Québec), Montréal, June 2001, pp. 16–18, under the title "Le terrain vague comme matériau".

In this redefinition Levesque departs from the troubling, and perhaps disabling, formulation of TV as formless but at the same time loses something of its uncanny quality, its disturbing otherness that Sola Morales identifies as an 'anonymous reality.' We would wish, I think, to retain this disquieting condition – the abject - and at the same time engage with the possibilities that these ambiguous and unpredictable urban spatialities lay before us. Coombes suggests that Bois' and Krauss' operation of alteration provides an entry into this project. Still seeing TV as formless he says that alteration is a way 'to think about design as something that leaves the realm of mediation through becoming excessive. Instead of connecting terrain vague back to the city through a domestication of its alterity, he argues that alteration 'reconnects TV back to the operation of being an excessive landscape.'¹¹ His examples allude to the works of Smithson cited earlier. One of Coombes' experiments involves taking material out of context. Sand, for example, is dumped into a terrain and casual visitors to this terrain then track the sand through adjacent formed landscapes. In another, stormwater is permitted to gush across a waste landscape. Coombes sees these as disruptive activities where materials 'do not reconcile with the terrain,' and it is this consideration which brings us, finally, to the inclusion of the formless in this series of Ten Point Guides devoted to exploring emergence in landscape architecture.

eight

Levesque reminds us of the ecological conditions often found in terrain vague, suggesting it permits or embraces 'an urban resurgence of the wild.' In fact, a terrain vague can be classified as a ruderal ecology, since there are extremely few TVs that are not colonized by plant species. Canadian landscape architect Michael Hough has observed that abandoned sites often display an ecological richness that designed landscapes do not.¹² This connection between disturbance and life in no way introduces form into the formlessness of terrain vague. Instead, it highlights the operations of difference that obtain in terrain vague. No terrains, not even abandoned and ambiguous territories, are indifferent to becoming. These landscapes are differing continually from and in themselves as ruderal species occupy them, through processes of weathering and decomposition, processes that do not alter their tendency to formlessness, but can even magnify it through an increase in disorder.

nine

Coombes' concept of alteration is actually disturbance with an added – and interesting – reference to alterity. Alterity refers to a condition of otherness, of something that exists outside the protocols of normative collectivity. To alter is to disturb a normal order. These ideas are particularly useful in the consideration of terrain vague as a condition that exists outside of normative urbanism, and which has no norms itself. An urban condition that moves far-from-equilibrium, self-disrupted by ruderal species, differentiating always from its earlier state, terrain vague embodies disruption.

ten

Design considered as disruption – alteration – provides a way into the involvement of landscape architecture with terrain vague. Preserving the complex, fragmentary, imprecise transformations that TV undergoes as it were on its own, the designer may, through a disruption of its internal flows, engage with TV in a way that does not inform or domesticate it. Thus we cycle back to the notions of the clinamen, the parasite and turbulence in general, all introduced in The Ten Point Guide to Disturbance.

¹¹ Coombes 2007

¹² Hough 1990

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