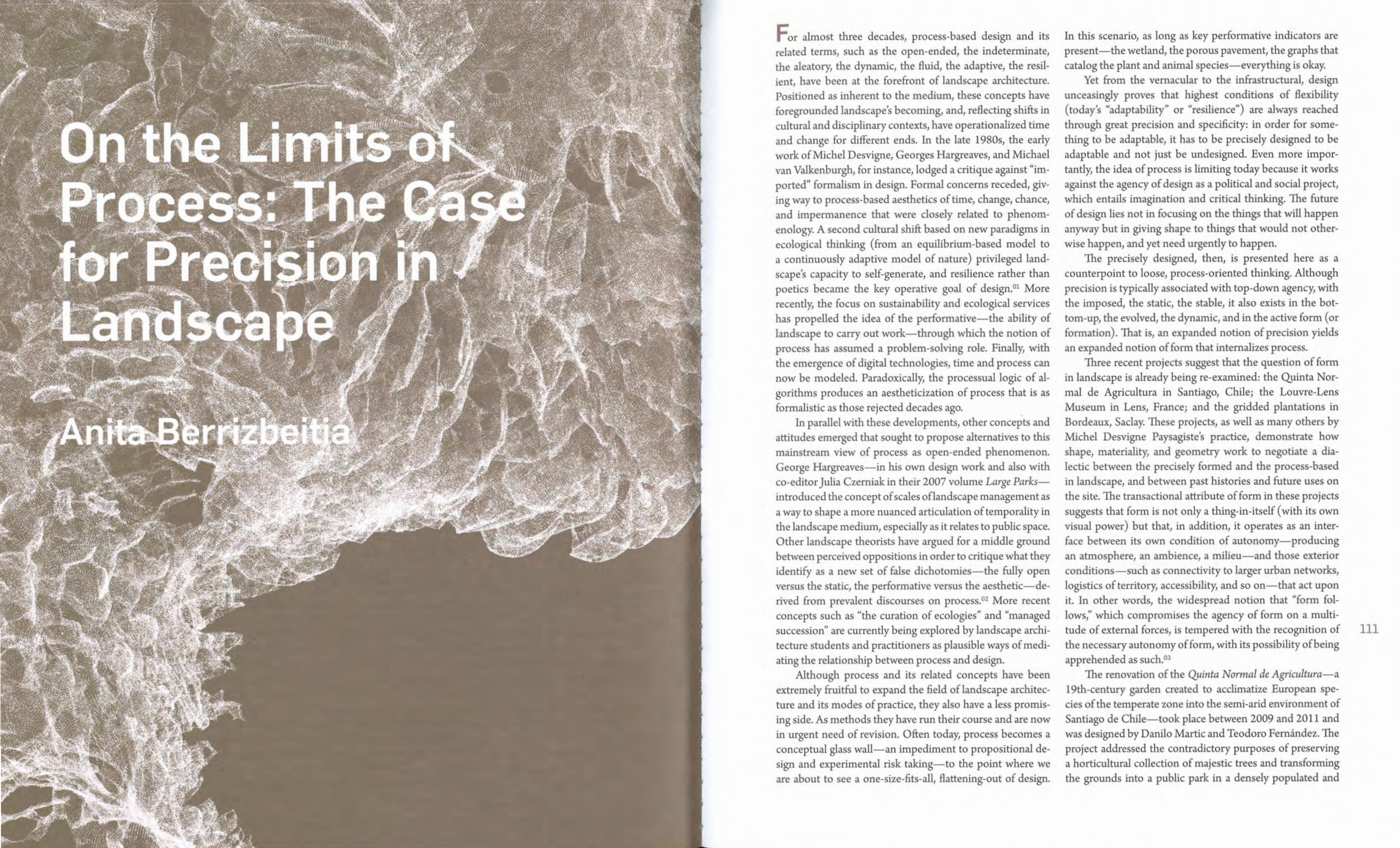


NEW GEOGRAPHIES 08

ISLAND



On the Limits of Process: The Case for Precision in Landscape

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For almost three decades, process-based design and its related terms, such as the open-ended, the indeterminate, the aleatory, the dynamic, the fluid, the adaptive, the resilient, have been at the forefront of landscape architecture. Positioned as inherent to the medium, these concepts have foregrounded landscape's becoming, and, reflecting shifts in cultural and disciplinary contexts, have operationalized time and change for different ends. In the late 1980s, the early work of Michel Desvigne, Georges Hargreaves, and Michael van Valkenburgh, for instance, lodged a critique against "imported" formalism in design. Formal concerns receded, giving way to process-based aesthetics of time, change, chance, and impermanence that were closely related to phenomenology. A second cultural shift based on new paradigms in ecological thinking (from an equilibrium-based model to a continuously adaptive model of nature) privileged landscape's capacity to self-generate, and resilience rather than poetics became the key operative goal of design.⁰¹ More recently, the focus on sustainability and ecological services has propelled the idea of the performative—the ability of landscape to carry out work—through which the notion of process has assumed a problem-solving role. Finally, with the emergence of digital technologies, time and process can now be modeled. Paradoxically, the processual logic of algorithms produces an aestheticization of process that is as formalistic as those rejected decades ago.

In parallel with these developments, other concepts and attitudes emerged that sought to propose alternatives to this mainstream view of process as open-ended phenomenon. George Hargreaves—in his own design work and also with co-editor Julia Czerniak in their 2007 volume *Large Parks*—introduced the concept of scales of landscape management as a way to shape a more nuanced articulation of temporality in the landscape medium, especially as it relates to public space. Other landscape theorists have argued for a middle ground between perceived oppositions in order to critique what they identify as a new set of false dichotomies—the fully open versus the static, the performative versus the aesthetic—derived from prevalent discourses on process.⁰² More recent concepts such as "the curation of ecologies" and "managed succession" are currently being explored by landscape architecture students and practitioners as plausible ways of mediating the relationship between process and design.

Although process and its related concepts have been extremely fruitful to expand the field of landscape architecture and its modes of practice, they also have a less promising side. As methods they have run their course and are now in urgent need of revision. Often today, process becomes a conceptual glass wall—an impediment to propositional design and experimental risk taking—to the point where we are about to see a one-size-fits-all, flattening-out of design.

In this scenario, as long as key performative indicators are present—the wetland, the porous pavement, the graphs that catalog the plant and animal species—everything is okay.

Yet from the vernacular to the infrastructural, design unceasingly proves that highest conditions of flexibility (today's "adaptability" or "resilience") are always reached through great precision and specificity: in order for something to be adaptable, it has to be precisely designed to be adaptable and not just be undesigned. Even more importantly, the idea of process is limiting today because it works against the agency of design as a political and social project, which entails imagination and critical thinking. The future of design lies not in focusing on the things that will happen anyway but in giving shape to things that would not otherwise happen, and yet need urgently to happen.

The precisely designed, then, is presented here as a counterpoint to loose, process-oriented thinking. Although precision is typically associated with top-down agency, with the imposed, the static, the stable, it also exists in the bottom-up, the evolved, the dynamic, and in the active form (or formation). That is, an expanded notion of precision yields an expanded notion of form that internalizes process.

Three recent projects suggest that the question of form in landscape is already being re-examined: the Quinta Normal de Agricultura in Santiago, Chile; the Louvre-Lens Museum in Lens, France; and the gridded plantations in Bordeaux, Saclay. These projects, as well as many others by Michel Desvigne Paysagiste's practice, demonstrate how shape, materiality, and geometry work to negotiate a dialectic between the precisely formed and the process-based in landscape, and between past histories and future uses on the site. The transactional attribute of form in these projects suggests that form is not only a thing-in-itself (with its own visual power) but that, in addition, it operates as an interface between its own condition of autonomy—producing an atmosphere, an ambience, a milieu—and those exterior conditions—such as connectivity to larger urban networks, logistics of territory, accessibility, and so on—that act upon it. In other words, the widespread notion that "form follows," which compromises the agency of form on a multitude of external forces, is tempered with the recognition of the necessary autonomy of form, with its possibility of being apprehended as such.⁰³

The renovation of the *Quinta Normal de Agricultura*—a 19th-century garden created to acclimatize European species of the temperate zone into the semi-arid environment of Santiago de Chile—took place between 2009 and 2011 and was designed by Danilo Martić and Teodoro Fernández. The project addressed the contradictory purposes of preserving a horticultural collection of majestic trees and transforming the grounds into a public park in a densely populated and



Danilo Martic and Teodoro Fernández, *Quinta Normal de Agricultura*, Santiago de Chile, Chile, 2011.

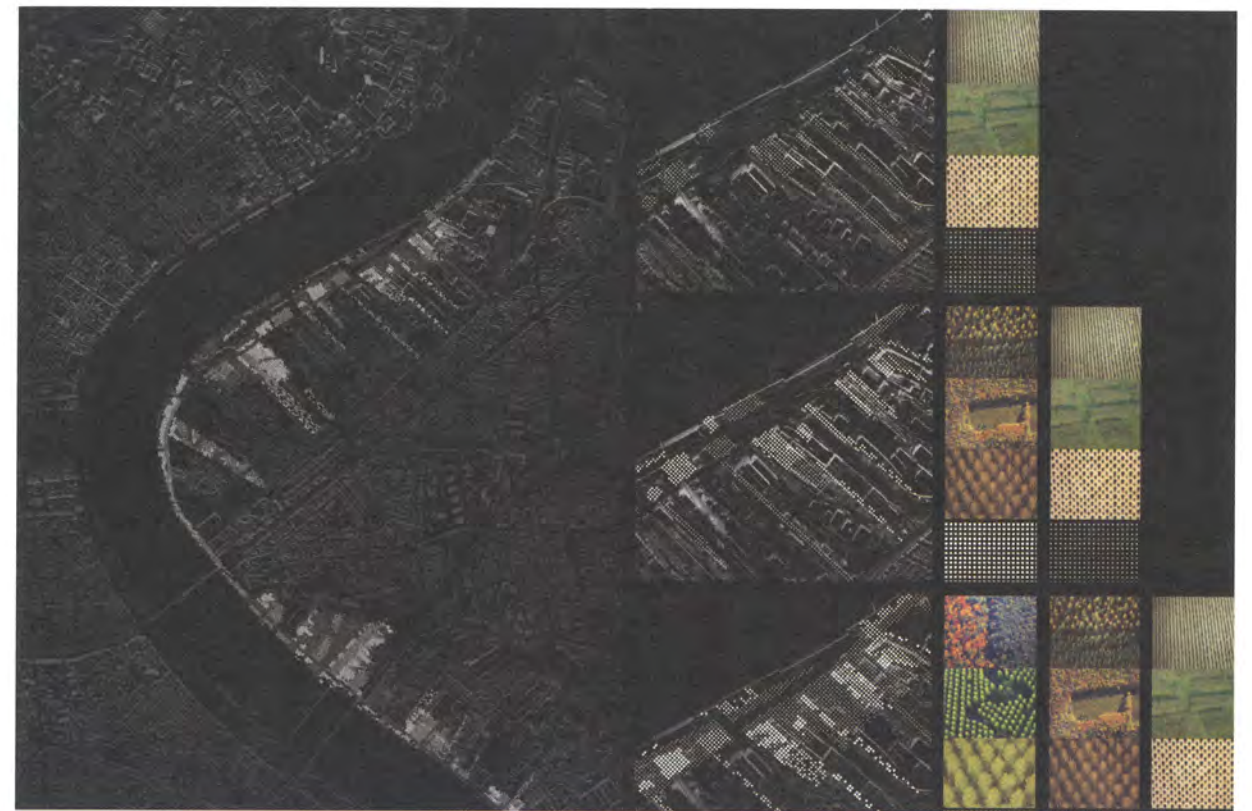
largely neglected part of the city. This entailed the installation of a durable, paved surface over what was previously the soft, porous ground of the garden, which could potentially harm the root zone of the trees. The primary, and most precise, design intervention consists of a series of surfaces built in stone, wood, and stone dust, all of which together do not amount to more than 12 inches in thickness. This enables social occupation of the space alongside preservation of the pre-existing trees. Here we see not only the visual and programmatic power of a surface precisely described but also the power of form as performative of the interface. Its formal, expressive character and its precise definition as a series of thinly laminated surfaces that negotiate between the trees lends expression and a sense of boundedness without restriction to this public park. The ground—with its hybrid geometries that are self-referential (autonomous) and, at the same time, respond to the location of the trees—appears and performs as a surface of contact between old forest canopy and new public realm. Precise form need not be dismissed as static or formalistic; rather, it can be embraced as an enabler of the evolution of urban space, from a previous mono-functional condition (in this case, a private institutional garden) to a multipurpose public space within a contemporary metropolitan area.

Another highly precise ground is that of the Museum Park Louvre-Lens, a collaborative project by SANAA (Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa) and landscape architect Catherine Mosbach, constructed on a 62-acre former coal-mining site. As has been often stated, the design registers the traces left by the mining economy (such as the landforms of displaced earth and the tunnels), preserves the vegetation of exotic species that emerged in its disturbed and toxic soil,

and sets up a series of curated successional ecologies in its gardens. But it is reductive to describe the designers' intentions only in terms of the site's mining past and the resulting anthropogenic ecologies.

What is evident here is a series of intentional distortions and reinterpretations that bring all the forces that have been at work—past, latent, active—to coalesce through a negotiation that critically calibrates their presence. Invoking the words *condensation*, *contamination* (of form and uses), *initiation*, and *consolidation*, Mosbach describes the conceptual framework for her project.⁰⁴ More importantly, she also uses the word *transfiguration* because it describes what the project achieves: a transformation into a different state. The slight curvature of the brushed aluminum facade and the wet pavement from the almost constant rain that falls in the region produce soft, blurred reflections that bring the larger landscape, the horizon, and the sky into the space of the site, separating it from the rest. Architecture and landscape collaborate to draw in an entire milieu, an ambiance, a delicate presence that diverts attention away from the politics of dominant urban institutions and toward that particular place and moment in time.

Michel Desvigne's proposition of landscape as an intermediate nature is another example of precise form that works as interface. Although often described as indeterminate, deferred, and open-ended, it is impossible to overlook the fact that Desvigne's work is, at the same time, full of definition, most often through the use of specifically dimensioned grids and other Euclidean geometries (paradoxically disdained today as static). To write this work off as only process is to disregard so much more that is present in it.



Michel Desvigne, implementation plan for the Right Bank of Bordeaux, Bordeaux, France, 2000.

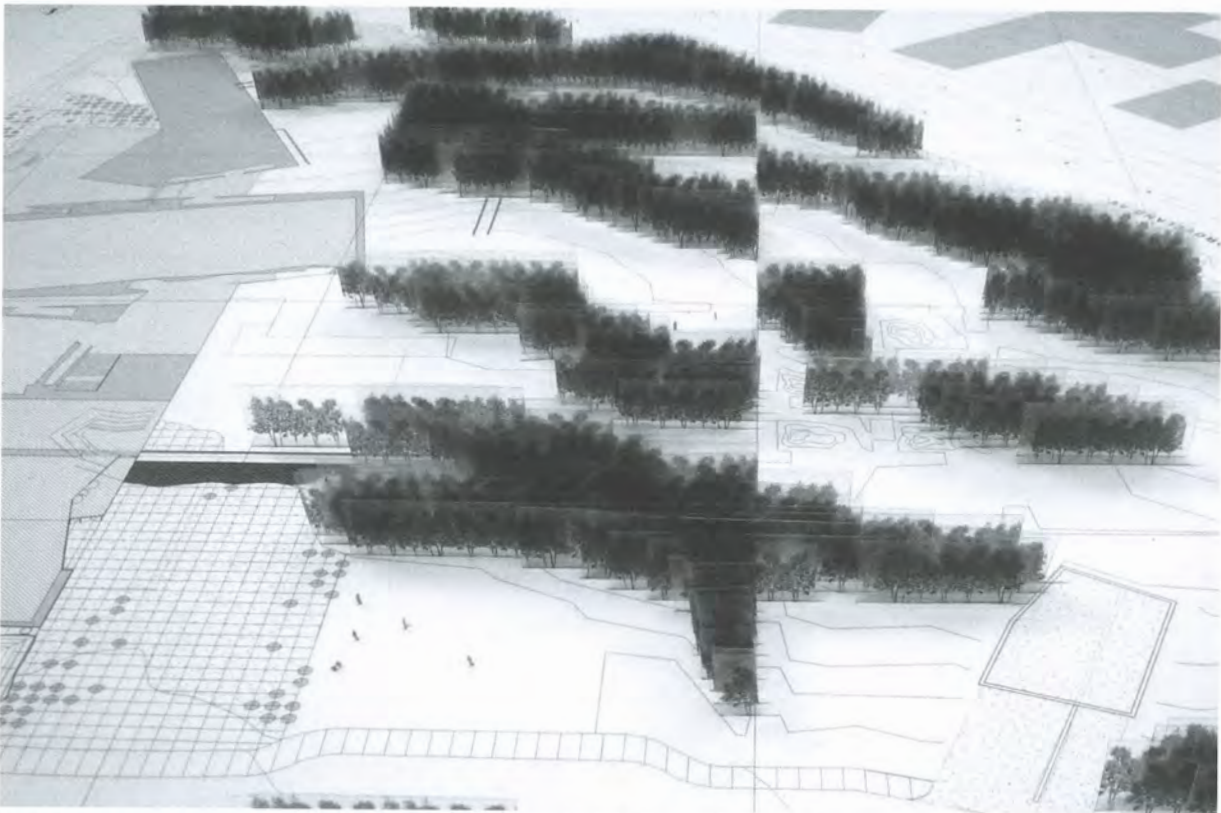
From the beginning of his career, Desvigne received unusual commissions for landscapes that did not yet exist as sites of intervention when the contracts were signed. Such commissions include Bordeaux, Saclay, and Euralens. Because these projects have taken many years (if not decades) to be fully implemented, they have required new forms of client–designer agreements and, in the absence of programs and real budgets, new forms of working. While this projection in time may classify the work as “process-based” design, Desvigne resists the conventional image of process as a spatially unarticulated landscape, such as those more typically associated with sites in an indeterminate programmatic and administrative state. From the project-scale proposals such as the Governor's Island competition in New York, the building terrace at Keio University, Tokyo, or the garden for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, to the larger, phased regional landscapes of Bordeaux, Lens, and Saclay, gridded forms serve to structure space, time, and program in an integrated and visible manner. Legibility and a visible coherence in the landscape are, for Desvigne, constitutive of a *res publica* in that they construct alternative ways of occupying and giving form to a place. Such forms of occupation are both retrospective—they trace past agricultural and geological structures; and projective—they are denaturalized

through distortions and hybridizations. Related to legibility, coherence, and *res publica* is also an insistence on the elaboration of “presence,”⁰⁵ which counters the normative and modernist conceptions of grids as spatial and visual structures that reject narratives. However, unlike looser vector-based, process-design approaches, Desvigne's highly specific geometries bridge different temporal regimes on the site and constitute an interface between a present post-industrial (Bordeaux, Lens) or post-agricultural (Saclay) condition of fallow land and a yet-to-be-determined future.

These landscapes are processes of rapidly replicating form, where precise recursive gestures create the possibility that we can apprehend structure. The designs are not clearly bounded: there is no hard boundary condition that separates the positive form of the design from its constitutive negative. Rather, there is gradual variation between the existing context and the proposed intervention. The landscape is understood as a continuum, and the design emerges as a precise and abrupt intensification in the gradient of relationships, which creates a transition between inside and outside. Intermediate natures are, then, not indeterminate natures but highly specific spaces of negotiation between past traces, geographical structure, agricultural practices, and the vision for a future public realm.⁰⁶



SANAA (Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa) and Catherine Mosbach, Museum Park Louvre-Lens, Lens, France, 2012.



Top: Michel Desvigne, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan, 2005. Bottom: Michel Desvigne, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2005.

Boundary, then, like form, requires a more nuanced definition as a dialectical condition. Though boundaries enable conceptual and experiential autonomy from that 'other' which is not landscape, they also engage this otherness in order to define the particular terms of relationship (such as what is left outside and what is allowed to be continuous). Such a notion counters the recent veneration of unarticulated flux, fluidity, and change, where everything is posited in equal terms as "urban," in favor of a negotiated interaction that recognizes the necessary difference between things, enabling a new imagination to emerge. While still standing for control, definition, determination, and other precision-based notions epitomized by the idea of boundary, form-as-interface modifies that notion in at least two ways. On the one hand, it cancels the agonistic closeness of the boundary, and on the other, it puts the emphasis on the interaction—on the dialectic between two sides.⁰⁷ In other words, the boundary is a condition that belongs to none of the sides (such as a wall) and is therefore a moment of separation, whereas the interface belongs to both sides and is therefore a moment of negotiation.

Early versions of these arguments were presented in lectures delivered at the University of Virginia in 2015 and at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design in 2016. I am grateful to colleagues at both schools and especially to Pablo Pérez-Ramos, coeditor of this issue of *New Geographies*, for valuable discussion and comment.

01. Equilibrium models of nature defend the idea that disturbances and fluctuations are automatically corrected by negative feedback mechanisms, whereas more adaptive models based on complexity tend to accept natural disturbances as common and necessary. See, for example, David Keller and Frank Golley, "Community, Niche, Diversity, and Stability," in their edited volume *The Philosophy of Ecology: From Science to Synthesis* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 101–10; Nina-Marie Lister, "Sustainable Large Parks: Ecological Design or Designer Ecology?" in *Large Parks*, ed. George Hargreaves and Julia Czerniak (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), 35–58; and Donald Worster, "The Ecology of Order and Chaos," *Environmental History Review* 14, nos. 1–2, 1989 *Conference Papers, Part 2* (Spring–Summer, 1990): 1–18.
02. Julia Czerniak's formulation of *appearance versus performance* constituted a key moment, marking a sort of "great divide"

- between operative and aesthetic capacities in landscape design that is very much present today. See Julia Czerniak's introduction, "Appearance, Performance: Landscape at Downsview," *CASE Downsview Park Toronto*, ed. Julia Czerniak (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Graduate School of Design, 2001), 12–23. For the claim of a midway position between the fully open and the static, see Anita Berrizbeitia, "Scales of Undecidability," in the same volume (116–25). In her essay "Sustaining Beauty: The Performance of Appearance," *Journal of Landscape Architecture* (Spring 2008): 6–23, Elizabeth Meyer also strengthened the linkage between performance and appearance at a moment when they were still understood as independent.
03. According to Louis Sullivan, "form (ever) follows function"; according to biologist D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, "form follows forces"; according to modernist landscape architect James C. Rose, "form follows plants"; and according to today's process-based landscape design, "form follows performance."
04. Catherine Mosbach, "Atmosphere, Atmosphere, Do I Look Anything Like Atmosphere," lecture delivered at the symposium "On Atmospheres: Spaces of Embodiment" organized by Silvia Benedito at Harvard University, Graduate School of Design, Cambridge, MA, February 4, 2016.

To be clear, I am not advocating here that we leave aside what remain as core environmental and social responsibilities of the field, which are also those that the world today requires. What I am arguing for, nevertheless, is that landscape architecture not be reduced to satisfying these responsibilities alone. The projects just described are located in socially and economically underserved communities with little prospect of growth or change in the short term. These projects do not represent public spaces in the service of a robust capitalism already in existence. Yet they demonstrate that landscape architecture's greatest effectiveness derives from exceeding the base conditions of sustainability, through the self-conscious command over form, geometry, and materiality as both autonomous and relational. These belong to disciplinary concerns that other fields which share the same environmental agendas (such as restoration ecology or civil engineering) do not, and cannot, have. Yet, what is at stake is not just the identity of the field but also the legibility of a socially constructed space that emerges through a deeper commitment to the exploration of form. The precisely designed form reveals rather than obscures. Its high definition communicates, draws in, mediates, and enables.

05. Anita Berrizbeitia, in conversation with Michel Desvigne, as part of Berrizbeitia's lecture "On the Limits of Process: The Case for Precision in Landscape," delivered at Harvard University Graduate School of Design, Cambridge, MA, April 14, 2016, <http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/#/media/anita-berrizbeitia-on-the-limits-of-process-the-case-for.html>.
06. Michel Desvigne, introduction to *Intermediate Natures: The Landscapes of Michel Desvigne* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2009), 13.
07. Marc Shell distinguishes between the Latin and Norse roots of the English word *island*, the Latin *insula* meaning "land insulated by and defined against a surrounding medium," and the Norse meaning "water-land"—literally the coast, the point where water and land happen at once. Unlike the more boundary-oriented Latin notion, the Norse meaning is closer to the idea of interface, as the moment where two worlds happen at once. See Marc Shell, "Defining Islands and Isolating Definitions," in *Islandology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 13–25.

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