Without End: Mats, Holes and the Promise of Landscape Urbanism

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The authority of nature has been usurped by the authority of landscape. Though no longer appealing to an idealized nature as the measure of morality and counterpoint to the city, landscape has, in a sense, replaced the word nature in that it is used as the measure of freedom, and as an emancipator from architecture. For architects, the widespread adoption of landscape as a conceptual tool is a means to expand the techniques by which architecture is produced, providing alternatives to conventional master planning, which is perceived as the great failure of modernism. One way this shift has become manifest is in the emergence of the "field" of landscape urbanism, which positions landscape "as the most relevant medium for the production and representation of contemporary urbanism." [1] While reflecting many positive changes, including more reciprocal relationships among design disciplines, the current framing of landscape urbanism has not gone far enough beyond the simple replacement of master planning with the equally generic term landscape. In other words, in much of the current literature, landscape as a representation of urbanism is more developed than landscape as a production of it.

In tracing the lineage of Landscape Urbanism, the recurring notion of the "hole" becomes evident.[2] This paper briefly outlines the role of "holes" as they relate to landscape and will argue why they must be instrumentalized more specifically if landscape urbanism is to productively combine both its architectural and landscape architectural predecessors. While covering the same geographic territory as landscape architecture or urban design, landscape urbanism is described as an interdisciplinary model which positions landscape as the generator, rather than backdrop, of urban development. The goal is to provide alternatives to the architectural and programmatic specificity of urban design. Rather than relying on the formalistic solid/void of older models where void and, by extension, landscape is a residual of architecture, landscape urbanism suggests the opposite, wherein the public landscape infrastructure organizes and shapes urban development. Charles Waldheim, who coined the phrase landscape urbanism in 1996, positions Tschumi's Parc de La Villette as its progenitor, suggesting an architectural lineage that draws landscape out of its position within landscape architecture and regional planning and aligns it with architectural critiques. [3]

Many of those writing under the rubric of landscape urbanism work hard to distance themselves from landscape architecture in two ways: first, landscape architecture's legacy of the picturesque, which foregrounds formal and pictorial representations; and, secondly, from the environmental determinism of the 1960s and 70s, which gave ecology a central role, as evidenced strongly in the work of Ian McHarg. In Landscape Urbanism: A Manual for the Machinic Landscape, Alejandro Zaero Polo states, "…the [landscape] discipline never developed a means of producing complexity away from imitation, and never evolved beyond the picturesque".[4] This is a common, and overly simplified, sentiment running throughout the book, though it is true that, today, landscape and ecology are increasingly used as paradigms for connectivity and indeterminacy, emphasizing diagrammatic processes and organizations, over pictorial representations, even though ecology has come to architects by way of Delueze or Banham, rather than through landscape ecology, a field of

study which has emerged since McHarg's hey-day. Nevertheless, the conflation of cultural and natural processes, and the incorporation of humans into ecological systems are very promising developments that position landscape urbanism as a viable, less-formulaic, and more site-specific alternative to New Urbanism or the generic city. Waldheim points out that this strategy is particularly suited to the post-industrial, decentralized or so-called Shrinking City, where inward vacancy and outward expansion are its defining characteristics.[5]

> "The greening of the depleted city centre may even be the most obvious characteristic of the future city centre."
> - Alison Smithson[6]

The inversion from conventional planning using architectural solids to a green infrastructure of holes, was introduced by Alison Smithson in 1977, in her essay T*he City Center Full of Holes.* Alison and Peter Smithson's work has recently been positioned as a progenitor to contemporary architects' interest in flexibility, indeterminacy and landscape. The Smithsons were instrumental in prompting a shift from fixed functionalism to one in which time was recognized as a primary factor in design, and criticized many practitioners of their day as being stuck in a static and deterministic *Euclidean Groove*.[7] Their concept of mat building, outlined by Alison Smithson in 1974, focused on flexible frameworks for accommodating growth and change and challenged the separation of architecture and urbanism. Her essay "*How to Recognize and Read Mat-Building*" became the basis for a recent Case Series book on Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital.[8] The last essay in the book, by Stan Allen, eloquently lays out the shift from mat building, which uses architecture as the primary method of ordering, to what he terms mat urbanism, which uses infrastructure and landscape as organizing frameworks. Yet in 1977, just three years after the publication of her Mat-Building essay, Alison Smithson's seemingly overlooked essay The City Center Full of Holes is the first to explicitly propose a landscape strategy to address the depopulation occurring in post-industrial cities. This was, at the time, a unique proposition for architects.

If Smithson's infinitely extendable mat inadvertently leads to expansive development and sprawl ,[9] then *City Center Full of Holes* addresses its corollary: vacancy and abandoned infrastructure. While she laments the deteriorating urban fabric, she doesn't propose to fix it with architecture. Instead, she recommends that the holes appearing in cities be landscaped as 'holding operations' for future development.[10] Using abandoned railroad right-of-ways and areas adjacent to freeways, she proposes that these infrastructures be appropriated to provide green connective tissue from the city centers to dispersed regions beyond. Positive associations with large scale connective landscapes, well-known to the English via garden cities, would encourage the acceptance of wildness in small vacant city sites without negative allusions to abandonment.

> If we can see what to do with the disused railway yards, using them as connective places, we might begin to indicate to people how to behave towards small vacant sites, interstical [sic] places[11]

These derelict sites and outdated infrastructures become conduits for the future reorganization of the post-industrial landscape. Therefore, sustainability in this context refers to the construction of provisionary uses and infrastructures which hold together disparate and changing urban circumstances. Though Smithson did not directly combine the "mat building" concept with the "green holes" concept, the part-to-whole relationship of the mat is akin to the site-to-system connectivity of the strategy of holes. The *Holes* essay is an outgrowth of earlier writing by the Smithsons and other Team X members, who differentiated between fixes, such as roadways and associated greenways, and more transient uses:

> If this distinction between the changing and the fixed were observed there would be less need for elaborate control over things for which no good case can be made for controlling, and legislative energy could be concentrated on the long-term structure.[12]

This framework was seen to sustain an infrastructure able to absorb social, cultural, and environmental changes but it also sustains our (architects)

Fig. 1. OMA's diagram of Melun Senart
SOURCE: p. 980, 981 in Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau. S, M, L, XL (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995)

relevance to large scale practice, after the so-called fall of the master plan.

This strategy has been the basis for several of OMA's large-scale projects. For example, in the planning framework for the new town of Melun-Senart, Koolhaas describes the project as outlining what should not happen rather than what should. [13]

> A system of bands…is inscribed on the site like an enormous Chinese figure. We propose to invest most of the energies needed for the development of Melun-Senart in the protection of these bands, in maintaining their emptiness.[14]

By Team X's definition, these would be fixes. OMA's ambition is to render more flexible measures absent in the solid/void of master plans, while being able to retain the projective order of the plan. Even so, the landscape is described by Koolhaas as "void" or "empty" and the criteria by which it is generated remains largely hidden; the Chinese figure self-contained (Fig. 1). They no doubt had criteria by which the bands were determined, but these were not elucidated. Without being specific about how they are generated, implemented, maintained or connected, the holes, like the voids of the master plans, merely become another formal device, unrelated to the specificities of the site.

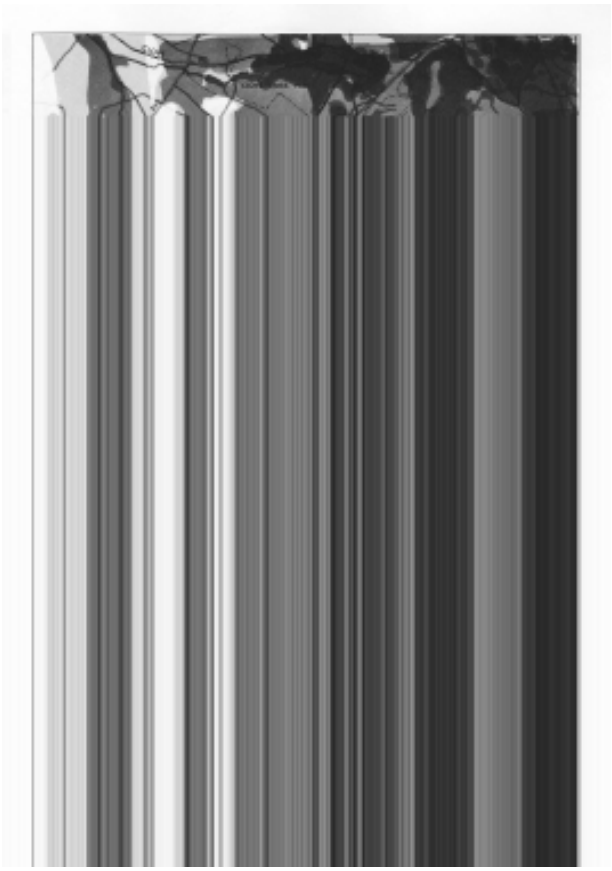

Fig. 2. McHarg's mapping of physiographic obstructions in order to determine road alignment
SOURCE: p. 37 in Ian McHarg. Design With Nature (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1992).

As mentioned earlier, Waldheim distinguishes landscape urbanism from landscape architecture's roots in regional planning, yet still acknowledges that one of the most pressing issues facing contemporary designers is "the relationship between natural environments and processes of urbanization globally."[15] To this end, Ian McHarg has been dismissed due to his dogmatic belief that ecology was the only relevant basis for design.[16] McHarg, founder of the Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning department at the University of Pennsylvania and author of the highly acclaimed book *Design with Nature* (1969) was narrow in his view of designers as mere objective collectors of data, yet he recognized the underlying geologic and hydrologic aspects of landscape process which could give rise to defining appropriate locations and uses.[17] McHarg's mappings, comprised of trans-

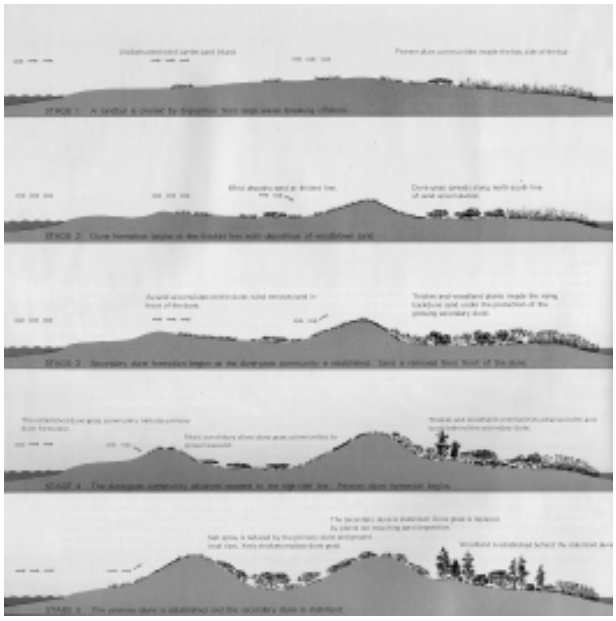

Fig. 3 McHarg's successional diagrams of dune development
SOURCE: p. 8 in Ian McHarg. Design With Nature (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1992).

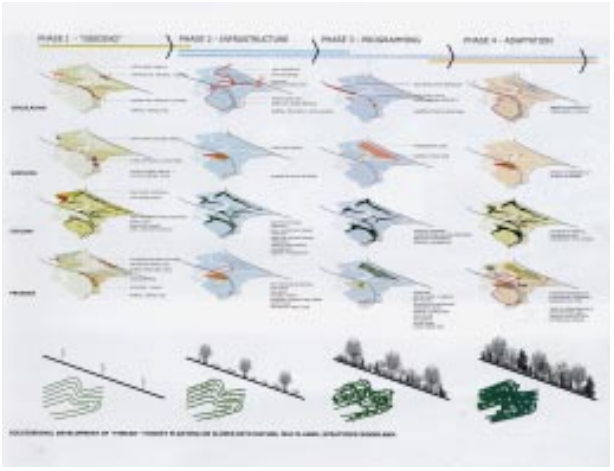

Fig. 4 Field Operations Phases and Successional Diagrams of woodland development
SOURCE: p. 25 in Praxis 4: Journal of Building and Writing (New Orleans, Cambridge: Praxis, Inc. 2002)

parent overlays each containing a different value with both social and natural characteristics, provided the basis for the location of design interventions and resulted in gradations of grey which "revealed" areas best suited to certain types of development. The blackest areas represent no-build zones and remind us of OMA's *Melun-Senart* (Fig. 2).

Smithson, Koolhaas and McHarg all use the instrumentality of the hole as a way of guiding action. For Smithson, the appearance of the landscape and how it was framed was accomplished through an idea about site and system connectivity. Knowing that the entire network could only be selectively maintained or occupied, the appearance of the landscape and its performance are inseparable.[18] For Koolhaas, the holes provide an infrastructure of protection, but still present landscape generically. And for McHarg, the instrumentality of the hole is based on the materiality of landscape and natural processes, though he neglects the design repercussions at the site or human scale. Natural systems do not correspond to property lines, social or economic conditions and therefore, must be "master planned" within those constraints if the end goal is improved performativity, however defined. Despite McHarg's reductive conception of design, he was concerned with the connectivity of systems and performative aspects of landscape as material. He also emphasized the use of mapping as a generative tool. This had a great influence on his students, such as Jim Corner, without whom there would be no "landscape urbanism" as it is currently defined.[19] Corner has made a significant contribution by devising methods of representation to better explain the processes of change inherent to landscapes, with conflating natural and cultural systems, and with describing mapping itself as the most creative and formative act (see Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).[20]

While I am encouraged by the aspirations and interdisciplinary nature of landscape urbanism, today's avoidance of master planning and fear of environmental determinism risks leaving landscape urbanism without criteria. In describing the influence of ecological thinking on landscape practice, Corner states that *"There is no end, no grand scheme…just a cumulative directionality toward further becoming."*[21] While it is true ecological processes have no goal, that is not necessarily the primary characteristic towards which we should strive. Complete openness can be as reductive as complete control. Again, I am not disagreeing with the underlying premise but rather with how we define the performative aspects of landscape, by

what means, and to what end. Right now, there is an over reliance on bracketing landscape as urbanism primarily through park design - Central Park to Parc to La Villette to Downsview and Fresh Kills - but parks are only one necessary aspect of urbanism. The essays on landscape urbanism quoted above have often left out architectural program all together. Instead, we should construct a much broader history of precedents and begin to incorporate, albeit in reconstituted relationships, the criteria of dwelling, working, transportation and recreation set forth in the CIAM functionalist city, critiques of which began with the Smithson's and Team X over fifty years ago.

> Landscape urbanism will in future, with its temporal and political characteristics, set the scene (albeit momentary) for democracy in action.[22]

Just as the modernists and New Urbanists are criticized for tying architectural form to social betterment, we cannot assume that adopting a landscape model, even if it is not a formal one, is any more likely to democratize, as suggested in the above quotation. As it stands now, landscape is still representative in many descriptions and projects – representative of freedom, democracy or ameliorative to architecture. Architects have already answered the call of Team X, which was to move beyond the "Euclidean groove." Now we have to take on their other challenge of disciplining dispersal "so that any resultant development does not become absolutely structureless."[22]

NOTES

This essay is framed within the context of how landscape urbanism has been positioned by those involved in developing programs of landscape urbanism within schools of architecture. In particular, I am referring to Charles Waldheim, founder of the Landscape Urbanism concentration at University of Illinois, Chicago and current Chair of Landscape Architecture at University of Toronto, and Mohsen Mostafavi and Ciro Najle's involvement with the post-graduate certificate in landscape urbanism at the Architectural Association and editors of Landscape Urbanism: A Manual for the Machinic Landscape. At the time of this publication, there are two forthcoming books on Landscape Urbanism, one by Waldheim and one by Kristina Hill. These publications will no doubt expand the historical and theoretical framework of landscape urbanism.

1. See footnote #27 in Charles Waldheim and Marili Santos-Munne, "Decamping Detroit" in Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim and Jason Young, eds., Stalking Detroit (Barcelona: Actar Press, 2001), p. 110.

2. For a related discussion on erasure and void, see James Corner "Landscraping" in Daskalakis, Waldheim Young, pp. 122-125.

3. Charles Waldheim, "Landscape Urbanism: A Genealogy" Praxis 4 (2002): 10-17.

4. Alejandro Zaero-Polo, "On Landscape" in Mohsen Mostafavi and Ciro Najle, eds. Landscape Urbanism: A Manual for the Machinic Landscape (London: Architectural Association, 2003), p. 133.

5. In addition to Praxis, see Waldheim and Marili Santos-Munne, in Daskalakis, Waldheim, Young, eds., pp. 105 – 121.

6. Alison Smithson, "The City Center Full of Holes," Architectural Association Quarterly (1977) 9/2, 3: p. 11.

7. Alison Smithson, ed., Team X Primer (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), p. 20.

8. Hashim Sarkis, ed., Case: Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital (Munich, London, NY: Prestel, 2001).

9. "If on the one hand, the Smithsons were among the first to recognize the potential of infrastructure to influence the future development of the city, they also unwittingly endorse the conceptual apparatus of modern sprawl" Stan Allen, "Mat Urbanism: The Thick 2-D" in Sarkis, p. 124.

10. Smithson, "The City Center Full of Holes," p. 11.

11. Ibid., p. 13. Though Smithson did not speak to environmental concerns as the basis for her thesis, she does footnote the necessity of natural resource conservation. Also, on the necessity for framing ecological function within aesthetic convention, see Joan Nassauer "Cultural Sustainability: Aligning Aesthetics and Ecology" in Joan Nassauer, ed., Placing Nature: Culture and Landscape Ecology (Washington: Island Press, 1997).

12. Smithson, Team X Primer, p. 68.

13. "This project is more a discourse on what should not happen at Melun-Senart than on what should." Rem Koolhaas, S, M, L, XL, (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), p. 974.

14. Ibid., p. 981.

15. Waldheim, Praxis, p. 10.

16. Ibid., p. 12. Also, see Anne Whiston Spirn "The Authority of Nature: Conflict, Confusion, and Renewal in Design, Planning, and Ecology" in Bart R. Johnson and

Kristina Hill, ed., Ecology and Design: Frameworks for Learning (Washington: Island Press, 2002), p. 36.

17. Ian McHarg. Design With Nature (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1992). Originally published 1969. Also, see Anne Whiston Spirn "The Authority of Nature: Conflict, Confusion, and Renewal in Design, Planning, and Ecology" in Bart R. Johnson and Kristina Hill, ed., Ecology and Design: Frameworks for Learning (Washington: Island Press, 2002), p. 36.

18. I am referring to Julia Czerniak's introduction to the Downsview Park competition where she states that the projects, in general, privileged performance over appearance. See "Appearance, Performance: Landscape at Downsview" in Julia Czerniak, ed. Case: Downsview Park Toronto (Munich, London, NY: Prestel, 2001), pp. 12-21.

19. It was Corner's phrase "landscape as urbanism" to which Waldheim has acknowledged his debt. See footnote #1 in Waldheim, Praxis 4 (2002): p. 17.

20. James Corner, "The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention" in Denis Cosgrove, ed., Mappings (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2002), pp. 213-252.

21. James Corner, "Ecology and Landscape as Agents of Creativity," in George F. Thompson and Frederick R. Steiner, eds., Ecological Design and Planning, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), p. 81.

22. Mohsen Mostafavi, "Landscapes of Urbanism" in Mostafavi and Najle, p. 9.

23. Alison Smithson, Team X Primer, p. 64.