

**The Reconceptualization of Landscape and Urbanism**  
**in the Contemporary Context**

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## **ABSTRACT**

For a long time, architecture was considered as the basic elements of urban design while landscapes were simply treated as healthful exceptions to the unhealthy city that surrounded them. Most of us tend to overlook the fact that originally, the formation of cities was driven by landscape in the form of farmlands and ranches. As a result, the districts of cities developed in regions that depended on complex irrigation systems often retain the pattern of early irrigation districts in their boundary locations. However, after stepping in into the industrial era, landscape was no longer the only feeder of cities, causing the withdraw of landscape from the historical urban design arena. In the wake of the social and environmental disasters of industrialization, postmodern architecture retreated to the comforting forms of nostalgia and seemingly stable, secure, and more permanent forms of urban arrangement when the importance of engaging landscape into urbanism gradually bubbled up. Landscape is no longer the background of the city, but a complex system that contains dynamic urban processes.

Firstly, the dilemma between cityscape and landscape will be explained and discussed according to the complicated urbanization process in Xinjiang's oasis cities. Then to get a general understanding of landscape urbanism, this paper will reconceptualize the disciplines of landscape and urbanism in the contemporary context. By emphasizing on landscape as a system, this paper intends to construct a dialectical understanding of how landscape relates to the processes of modern urbanism. Accordingly, this paper explores the interactions between city and landscape in terms of formation, function, systematicness, and temporality. Moreover, it will be proposed that landscape is a suitable medium and considerable methodology in urbanism through which to order programmatic and social change over time, especially complex evolving arrangements of urban activities. Like infrastructures, landscape can be constructed within the city that does real work.

## **KEYWORDS**

Cityscape; Landscape; Urbanism; Medium; Infrastructure;

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## INTRODUCTION

The natural landscape has an important influence on human activities, especially at the beginning of human civilization and the agricultural era when productivity was still laggard. In regions with harsh natural environments, human survival and development are restricted by the geographical context, making it difficult to form settlements and cities. As the largest province in China, Xinjiang is such a case with an area of 1.66 million square kilometers, locating at the northwestern border of China. The geographical environment of Xinjiang is rather inclement where the biggest desert in China-- the Taklimakan desert locates. A peculiar natural landscape--oasis thus was born around Tarim Basin, which provides space for production and social activities as well as contributes to the formation and development of cities.

However, Xinjiang oases are geomorphologically enclosed, geographically dispersed, and ecologically fragile. The spatial form of the oasis city was constantly changing with economic development and the transformation of transportation methods. Historically, Oasis cities were regionally isolated so that their economic activities usually occurred internally. At this moment, the landscape was the only feeder and carrier of the early cities. In the process of urbanization, one of the most prominent urban features was the shift from "closed" to "open". Gradually, the oasis town system relied more on external energy, material, and information to develop. Since the oases were exceeding their capacity, the city started to turn desert into artificial oases, which could be described as "oasification". Specifically, doubled in the last 50 years, the total area of Xinjiang Oasis is 12.9016 million hectares, accounting for 7.76% area of the whole region, among which 9.073 hectares is artificial oases.<sup>1</sup> While at the same time, the city behaved more like the new "desert" at the material level, eroding from the very heart of the oasis and causing a series of problems, such as water shortage, air pollution, and culture destruction etc.

The relationship between city and landscape in Xinjiang is highly complex systemic and the understanding of the two roles is essential in managing its urban development. Because of the propaganda of modernization, the same city template is copying and pasting everywhere in China with little consideration to the regional particularity. The landscape, which used to be considered as the background of the city, urgently needs to be treated as a component of the city with no less important than buildings, especially in oasis city whose life is closely tied to the oasis. Because the landscape is the only native language of that region which should not be replaced by Esperanto. In the following chapters, this thesis will discuss the reconceptualization and systematicness of landscape in the process of urbanism considering the specific geographical context. From city's perspective, city needs to be conceptualized like landscape as a living arena of processes and exchanges over time, permitting new forces and connections to set up the ground for new activities and patterns of inhabitation. The new conception of landscape in terms of urbanism will hopefully shed light on the reflection on

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<sup>1</sup> Yimin He, 绿洲与绿洲城市:从农牧时代到工业时代新疆城市发展的特点(Oasis and Oasis city: The characteristics of Xinjiang urbanism from the agricultural and animal husbandry era to the industrial era), Journal of Ethnology, 2017.

disciplinary and how architects and urban planners reconsider the role of landscape, providing new methodology in dealing with Xinjiang's situation.

## **DILEMMA: CITYSCAPE AND LANDSCAPE**

Modernism was abundantly transparent in its division of components that made up a new city: housing, work, recreation, commerce, etc. These elements were thought to be all that was required, and the masterplan provided the vehicle for holding their functions together whereas in any case guaranteeing that they remained particular and separated.<sup>2</sup> At the same time landscape was considered no more than the green color filling the white voids on the map. In modern cities, regularity and order were emphasized more than fantasy and tumult by the leading power. Urbanists and architects were never given the preference to predict how the whole city would look like in the process of urbanism. Urban landscape, which has long been neglected, on the other hand, with its temporal characteristics, remains forever incomplete and unruly, which dramatically becomes the only fresh blood in the city.

Traditionally, landscape is firmly attached to the cultural image of "Nature" which is mostly represented by delicately undulating peaceful scene, generally considered ethical, generous and alleviating, a moral as well as an antidote to the broken environmental and social qualities of the contemporary city.<sup>3</sup> In 1955, the mega-mall urbanist Victor Gruen coined the term "cityscape," which he posited in contradistinction to "landscape."<sup>4</sup> For Gruen, cityscape or architecture was the protagonist in the war of converting chaos into order and changing mechanization from a tyrant to a slave at the city's heart. On the contrary, landscape was the environment where nature was predominant, such as mountain valleys and rural areas, having little effect on modernization.<sup>5</sup> By designing a large number of shopping malls, Gruen temporarily solved the problems of suburban commercial slums in American cities, but such actions were only palliatives. Because those giant commercial machines kept trapping people inside without breathing the "free air", thus spreading new diseases to the sick urban life. The idea that cityscape and landscape are clearly isolated is never applicable since the city will not be able to break its connections to the land and landscape, not to mention human beings get independent of the natural environment. To further explain, all urban constructions have been built into the pattern of pre-existing land frameworks, comprised of process and elements – water streams, edges, bowls, shorelines, plants which both extend beyond the human city in space and are contained within its boundaries. When their scale is now not free of urban limits, they subsume the city and its built frameworks.<sup>6</sup> Landscape is not the background of the city,

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<sup>2</sup> Mohsen Mostafavi, "Landscapes of Urbanism", *Landscape Urbanism: A Manual for the Machinic Landscape*, edited by Mohsen Mostafavi and Ciro Najle (London: Architectural Association, 2003), 5-9.

<sup>3</sup> James Corner, "Terra Fluxus", *Landscape Urbanism Reader*, ed. Charles Waldheim (New York: Princeton Architectural Press 2006), 21-34.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Gruen, *The Heart of our Cities: The Urban Crisis, Diagnosis and Cure* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> Victor Gruen, "Cityscape and Landscape", Arts & Architecture, 1955, Fort Worth Public Library Digital Archives, accessed on January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Kristina Hill, "Landscape as a system, city as landscape", *System Landschaft : Zeitgenössische Deutsche Landschaftsarchitektur*. (Basel: Birkhäuser 2009), 26-45.

but the underlying system of the city.

The emphasis on landscape as a system does not imply to exclude architectural form but rather looks for constructing an argumentative understanding of how landscape relates to the processes of urbanism. This infers shifting attention away from the object qualities of space (whether formal or scenic) to the systems that condition the distribution and density of urban form.<sup>7</sup> Just as Corner suggested, “With this preface, we can begin to imagine how the concept of landscape urbanism suggests a more promising, more radical, and more creative form of practice than that defined by rigid disciplinary categorizations.”<sup>8</sup> The relative freedom and changefulness of landscape can hopefully be a cure to the implicit finitude of zoning.<sup>9</sup>

### **TRANSITION: CITY AS LANDSCAPE**

Over recent centuries of urban design, the predominant use of analytical figure-ground plans that excluded vegetation, topography, or even spaces with public access, have left our idea of the city as abstract as to be almost irrelevant to the actual place designers sought to describe. However, Giambattista Nolli's map of Rome in 1748 showed not just building figures and white ground, but also patterns of vegetation and topography in the exterior of buildings, and public use in the interior. Buildings and boundaries were shown in the plan view, whereas plants appeared within the bird's eye perspective to present a holistic understanding of the city. The use of figure-ground maps in modern urban design on the contrary, reflects our powerlessness to perceive the fundamental discernment of the city's co-existence with the landscape.

When the Roma Interrotta project was launched in 1978, among the 12 architects envisioning the future Rome based on the Nolli's map, Paolo Portoghesi however, proposed a critical relationship of continuity between the historical landscape and its present counterpart. To retrieve the 'future' in the 'past', Portoghesi researched on 'Rome before Rome'.<sup>10</sup> That is, depending on the typical original landscape which still ran beneath the city and undermined the foundation of its buildings, the structure of the future city was resuscitated and reorganized by contemporary linguistics. To Portoghesi, former ruins and landscape were the specific nature of the city because they spoke the native language and dialect which should never be replaced by Esperanto. The study on the landscape before the construction of the city of Rome, its orography and analogy, results in the final tree-like masterplan (Fig.1), unexpectedly blurring the boundary between city and landscape: landscape forms the city and at the same time the city becomes the landscape.

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<sup>7</sup> Corner, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Mostafavi, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Sartogo, Piero. *Roma interrotta: twelve interventions on the Nolli's plan of Rome: in the MAXXI architettura collections*. (Monza: Johan & Levi editore 2014), 103.



**Fig 1: Plan of Roma Interrotta by, 1978**

Paolo Portoghesi and Vittorio Gigliotti, *Roma Interrotta*, 1978, accessed on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021.

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/c4/8f/e6/c48fe6fe612608044747a3e415245d67.jpg>.

According to the work of Portoghesi, landscape clearly can produce new insights in response to the contemporary urban situation. It also reveals the need for contemporary techniques of representing the radical characteristics of the city, wherein the full scope of agents, actors, and forces that work across a given territory might be brought into consideration, mobilized, and redirected. Such need forces us to reconsider the essential inquiries, for example, "what is a building?" and "what is a landscape?". In this lies the possibility to refine the parameters of each discipline—urbanism and landscape—in relation to each other. Moreover, the city should not be given superiority over the landscape since the city was born from it and to some extent, the city is the landscape itself. Similar to the terminology “Landscape Urbanism” advocate and elaborated by urbanist Charles Waldheim and landscape architect James Corner, such new crossovers allow us to depict the territory in terms of an equivalent dialogue between architecture and landscape<sup>11</sup>. Yet this dialogue is not restricted by the traditional definition of terms 'city' and 'landscape'; it allows for the simultaneous presence of the one within the other, cities as landscapes, landscapes as cities.

## **METHODOLOGY: LANDSCAPE AS INFRASTRUCTURE**

In terms of the methodology of urban management, the relationship of urbanism to landscape might start to operate on a metaphoric and metonymic register. The concept that urbanism relies much on the construction of surfaces and voids as it does on the construction of buildings seems to make the literal use of landscape as a material device a necessity. Notwithstanding, the fact that landscape includes an explicit recognition of the changing nature of the land through time permits the possibility of a profitable relationship on a

<sup>11</sup> Charles Waldheim, “Landscape as Urbanism”, *Landscape Urbanism Reader*, ed. Charles Waldheim (New York: Princeton Architectural Press 2006), 35-53.

metonymic register to urbanism whose conception of time has commonly gotten more implicit and linear.<sup>12</sup> Like cities, landscapes are cultural, social, and political agents whose job is not exhausted by their formal and aesthetic performance. According to the Australian landscape architect Richard Weller, “the landscape itself is a medium through which all ecological transactions must pass: it is the infrastructure of the future.”<sup>13</sup>

Among the first projects to orchestrate urban programs as a landscape process was the 1982 Competition for Parc de la Villette. The competition for la Villette began a trajectory of the postmodern urban park, in which landscape was itself conceived as a complex medium capable of articulating relations between urban infrastructure, public events, and indeterminate urban futures for large post-industrial sites, rather than simply as healthful scenery.<sup>14</sup> Just like Bernard Tschumi described the La Villette project, “The park could be conceived as one of the largest buildings ever constructed – a discontinuous building, but nevertheless a single structure, overlapping certain area with the city and the existing suburbs.”<sup>15</sup> Walking around La Villette under the open sky, it is pretty clear that it is a park and not much like a building at all. But Tschumi’s deconstructive approach compels us to reconsider the relationship between such oppositions as culture and nature, urban and rural, form and function. The project formulated landscape as the most suitable medium through which to order programmatic and social change over time, especially complex evolving arrangements of urban activities.

Urban parks reveal the role of large-scale landscape as an element of urban infrastructure whose openness is the one thing that cannot be experienced in buildings. But considering the high density of buildings in modern cities, it is not always possible to build such a large landscape project. What’s worse, numerous landscapes have already been thoughtlessly disposed of in the process of rapid urbanization. What can we do to these spaces when we want to bring nature back, by simply erasing them? Architect Georges Descombes proposed an ingenious answer in his project the 'Renaturation of the River Aire'. From the late 19th century, the Aire river was canalized for farming purposes. In 2001 State of Geneva opened a competition with the idea of restoring the river to its original shape by destroying the canal. Instead of replacing the canal with an organic river, Descombes transformed the existing canal into a reference line giving the possibility to understand the evolution of the landscape and alter it by juxtaposing a vast divagation space as a new riverbed. The former straight stream is still in use as a linear park while the diamond- shape sand islands open a complex series of undetermined channels for the flows (Fig 2).<sup>16</sup> Contrasting with the old gesture of fixing the river in one place, this project makes way to an indeterminate evolution of the river course.

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<sup>12</sup> Mostafavi, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Weller, “Landscape Architecture and the City Now,” unpublished manuscript based on “Toward an Art of Infrastructure in the Theory and Practice of Contemporary Landscape Architecture,” keynote address, MESH Conference, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Australia, July 9, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Waldheim, 40.

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Tschumi, “From Cinégramme Folie” (1987), *Rethinking Landscape: A Critical Reader*. ed. Ian Thompson (London: Routledge, 2009), 143-146.

<sup>16</sup> Atelier Descombes Rampini and Superpositions, “Renaturation of the River Aire”, accessed on January 3, 2021. <http://landezine.com/index.php/2016/06/renaturation-of-the-river-aire-geneva/>.



With a series of appropriate interventions, the urgent ecological shifts are incorporated into a larger cultural change, breaking the opposition between nature and culture.



**Fig 2: Renaturation of the River Aire, 2016**

Superpositions, *Top view of river Aire project, 2016*, accessed on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021.

<http://landezine.com/index.php/2016/06/renaturation-of-the-river-aire-geneva/>

In the context of landscape urbanism, the shift from an image-based planning process to an operative method requires the shift from architecture's historical role as the basic building block of urban design to surface (both natural and artificial) understood as fundamental urban infrastructure.<sup>17</sup> That is to say, architectures, landscapes, and all kinds of surfaces have the same hierarchy in terms of urban design. With this revolutionary transition, the new conception of landscape will ideally be finalized, like architect Alex Wall suggested “ the term of landscape no longer refers to prospects of pastoral innocence but rather invokes the functioning matrix of connective tissues that organized not only objects and spaces but dynamic processes and events that move through them.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the methodology -- landscape as infrastructure-- indicates the need for reevaluation of all the material elements, both physical and conceptual, permanent and ephemeral that together provide the infrastructure of the urban: building, roads, rivers, parks, bridges, lights, markings, etc. Rather than a nostalgic longing for lost models of public space, monuments, piazzas, we should envision, support and construct alternative models of urbanism that are open to, and encourage, participation by all citizens. By constructing new infrastructures that can be both landscape and architecture at the same time, the tension between cityscape and landscape can hopefully be defused.

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<sup>17</sup> Mostafavi, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Alex wall, “Programming the Urban Surface”, *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture*, ed. James Corner (Princeton Architectural Press: 1999), 223.

## CONCLUSION

Although being neglected for a long time by architects and urbanists, landscape is never lost its fundamental role in the process of urbanism. Ever since the agricultural era, landscape was both the instigator and accelerator of urban development, leaving traces in the genes of the city. In the contemporary context, landscape is no longer firmly attached to the cultural image of nature but seen as a complex system that conditions the distribution and density of urban form. The emphasis on landscape as a system does not imply to exclude architectural form but rather looks for constructing a dialectical understanding of how landscape relates to the processes of urbanism.

From the city's perspective, city is like landscape as a living arena of processes and exchanges over time, permitting new forces and connections to set up the ground for new activities and patterns of inhabitation. The transition of the understanding city as landscape allows us to depict the territory in terms of an equivalent dialogue between architecture and landscape, which also renews the conception of landscape. The reconceptualization of city and landscape lies the potential to refine the parameters of each discipline—urbanism and landscape—in relation to each other, which could be added to the current collection of material components as inspirations to the urbanism methodology.

When comes to how we can turn an image-based planning process into an operative method, it requires an ideological shift from architecture's historical role as the basic elements of urban design to the general surface understood as fundamental urban infrastructure. In the practice of urban park design in the 20th century, the urban program was orchestrated as a landscape process. Landscape was conceived not as an antidote to the unhealthy city anymore, but rather a complex medium capable of articulating relations between urban infrastructure, public events, and indeterminate urban futures. Even the historically destructive landscapes for developing purposes have the potential to be transformed into better infrastructures in the urban realm with appropriate interventions. Among the practices by different architects, the key methodology is to construct a landscape as an infrastructure that deserves more considerations on its position.

Furthermore, a consideration of urbanism in terms of the network and infrastructure of a large landscape should not only bring to bear the utilitarian aspects of these projects but their reflexive and pleasurable duties. By means of encouraging participation by all citizens, landscape or city will in the future, with their temporal and social characteristics, set the scene for urban prosperity.

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