

## Gardens of Dialectics

*A story of decay and reconstruction.*





## A different notion of beginning

To create a new beginning is the ultimate scope of modernity. The development of garden suburbs was intended to generate communities through, immersion in a calm and controlled image of nature. However, the decline of contemporary garden suburbs brings to question whether is still possible to re-imagine life, without the imposition of a renewed rationality. Life in a garden suburb, means today facing demographic decline and the absence of opportunities once based on rationalized forms of dependencies from the factory.

How can we reinterpret the notion of a new social and environmental beginning that is not based on the imposition of a controlled rationality and a univocal relationship of exploitation?

Gardens of Dialectics is not only the proposal for new kind of public space, but also the proposal for a shift in the modalities through which we conceive urban planning, territory and community. Garden suburbs still continues to be developed through policies of tabula rasa as fertile ground for renewed economic growth. The addition of new program and new architecture, implies the forgetting of what was there “before” in exchange of the faith for a more efficient rationality.

The project argue that the very roots of life in garden suburbs, should be searched in a radical rethinking of urban planning. Rethinking fundamentally the inhabitation of a territory as an active re-creation rather than passive consumption and ultimately architecture as a process rather than a final object.

The project explores the possibilities expressed by the lack of design that characterize derelict plots in the city. Here is possible to imagine a new type of public space where to actively explore, read and modify the territory. The role of design is then subverted to the delicate act of revealing and allowing forms of production disclosed by a renewed relationship with nature.

Between the large number of abandoned plots, the cultural heart of the Garden City of Waterschei is taken as the perfect example of the physical materialization of relationships of power and control over the surroundings. Its embracing plan, recalling that of a suburban palace, celebrate the imposition of a rational plan over the surroundings. Inside the plot, all the processes that are shaping contemporary garden suburbs are represented: the coexistence of abandoned with renewed, rationalized with unknown, stranger with the native.

Rather than filling the space through the addition of new architecture, the project encloses and makes explicit existing ecologies. The enclosure give the opportunity for re-thinking a beginning of such spaces. As a second act, a series of machines, interventions, demolitions are implemented to allow generating new forms of production through interactions with plants, animals and minerals. In this sense, creating an active physical vocabulary of the surrounding natural landscape and making it accessible to modifications. The parts are not designed by the imposition of a program, but by imagining narratives and productive interactions that can take place. It is a new type of suburban public space, where the notion of economical exploitation is substituted by that of knowledge and consumption by that of re-creation.

In the Gardens of Dialectics, sheep graze next to visitors, the smell of bread mixes with that of earth and foreign plants grows next to indigenous ones.



## Abstract

Situated in the Belgian province of Limburg, close to the border with Germany and Netherlands, Genk appears as a city shaped by the dynamics of industrialization and exploitation of natural resources. Here, an archipelago of mine shafts, garden suburbs and coal avenues has been laid down over the rural landscape of the Campine Region. Genk appears to strangers as a “somewhere city”, as described by the Belgian journalist Pascal Verbeken.

A series of Utopian projects and ideas, such as The Garden City, can be regarded as influencing the space, the structure and the life in the Miner’s Villages of the city. They were, in fact, developed as environments where labour and local resources could be rationalized with the aim of control and exploitation.

After the last mining activity closed, in 1987, the city is facing the problematics of an economic decline. By walking throughout the Garden City of Waterschei it is possible to realize how the process of decay of its buildings is however making space for the return of the natural landscape as a primary figure. In the civic and cultural heart of the Garden City, next to a school, a shop a social club and twenty apartments, within the boundaries of an abandoned plot, nature is taking over the former

miner’s cultural club. The plot is connected to the larger figure of the forest that spontaneously has expanded over the abandoned mining ground. A forest which is composed by a variety of ecologies, plants and animals.

Here the community coexist with a process of decay and shrinking of the city. This opens the way to a counter-project that consider decay and the lack of control over certain plots in the city, not as a failure but as an opportunity. An opportunity where a series of selective demolitions, next to a careful work of “bricolage”, can generate a garden where the natural landscape and society coexist. The element of the garden becomes a connection between man and landscape that is not bounded to a logic of profit. Portions of natural landscape within the city that acts as social infrastructure, as theorized by Frederick Law Olmsted in the design of its urban parks. In this context, a project should consider which elements to control and which other elements should not be controlled, what to demolish and what to leave, where to add and where to subtract. Such a garden should coexist with the activities that already take place in the site. A careful work of analysis of the existing buildings, used and not used, is then necessary to understand which elements can be moved, added or subtracted.

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INTRODUCTION:  
ISLANDS IN THE  
NEVELSTAD

The Flemish rural-urban landscape is often described as Nevelstad. The word “Nevel” in Dutch has the meaning of “Fog”, perfectly describing the isotropic and heterogenous accumulation of buildings and productive land that characterize this part of Europe. Situated in the province of Limburg, close to the border with Germany and Netherlands, Genk appears as a city shaped by the dynamics of an industrial system that responds to the logic of exploitation rather than constituting a coherent whole. Genk is a “somewhere city”, as described by the Belgian journalist Pascal Verbeken.<sup>1</sup>

Here the image of the compact city, the city as an independent identity, cannot be applied. The traditional dialectics between city and country has lost its meaning, rather we can talk of the result of unbridled growth.<sup>2</sup> The modalities of expansion of such a urban territory has been determined by market’s mechanisms, those mechanisms that eventually act on and shape society.<sup>3</sup>

The expansion of the urban fabric however, as strongly dependent by economical factors, is today facing a period of decline. This part of Belgium is not economically relevant anymore and large companies such as Ford are abandoning interests in the region. Many productive sites and suburban houses are being demolished due to the economical convenience, making space for the landscape to become again the predominant figure. This opens the way to considerations over new relationships between man and land, in the background of an economically declining territory.

1. Verbeken, Pascal, and Jimmy Kets. Somewhere City: Een Stadsportret Van Genk. Antwerpen: Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, 2014.

2. Ryckewaert, Michael. The Minimal Rationality of Housing Patterns in Flanders’ Nevelstad OASE: Journal for architecture, N.60 Urbanism out of Town, Editors: Tom Avermaete, Pnina Avidar, Like Bijlsma, Christoph Grafe, Madeleine Maaskant, Marcel Musch, Marc Schoonderbeek, Lara Schrijver, Mechthild Stuhlmacher, SUN Publishers, 2002.

3. Ibid. Ryckewaert, 2002.

4. Bruno De Meulder, Jan Schreurs, Annabel Cock, Bruno Notteboom, “Patching up the Belgian Urban Landscape”, in OASE #52.

5. Ibid. De Meulder, Schreurs, Cock, Notteboom.

Fig. 1: Genk: a collection of islands without a predominant centre. Source: Informatie Vlaanderen, <https://download.vlaanderen.be>

Pp.12: Aerial picture of Genk, appearing as scattered built areas in a green sea. Source: TOP Limburg.





*“An intense poetry lurks side by side with a nauseating banality behind the commonplace of everyday habitation. This incredibly chaotic urban landscape seems to lack any coherence.”<sup>5</sup>*





TERRITORY, TECHNICS  
AND CONTROL



THE MINE, THE FACTORY  
AND THE RAILROAD

In the age of the ancien régime Genk was surrounded by virgin Land. The scarcity of productive land, the arid and sandy terrain was responsible for a geography made of scattered hamlets. The few productive plots of land were mainly used for subsistence agriculture.

While the rest of Europe faces the transition to industrialization and the main Belgian cities starts to expands in the surrounding territory, the growth of Genk remained limited and unimportant. The poetry of the untouched landscape attracted painters and artists, in search for escape from the city.

The hamlets around Genk started a process of growth and suburbanization in the period in which agriculture was facing a transition towards less intensive forms. The discovery of coal in the region brought to the development and growth of the infrastructure. In that same period, a system of industrial sites and commuting facilities were developing apace. The village of Genk quickly acquired the status of a town without, however, any clearly identifiable central point

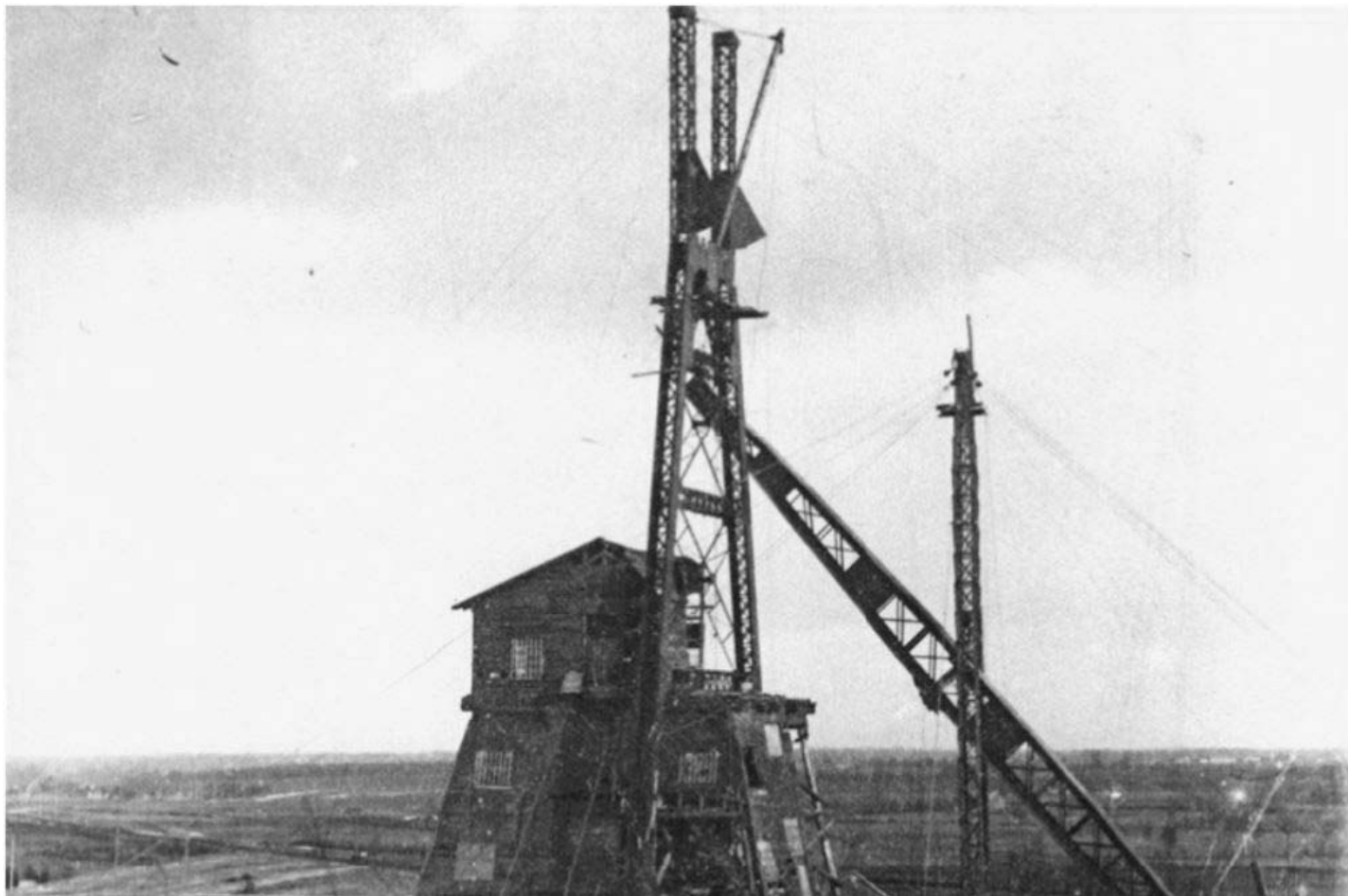
The territory becomes shaped by the activities of extraction and the expansion of the infrastructural network. The number of coal avenues and motorways doubled while the Albert Canal changed direction in order accommodate the infrastructural necessities of the coal basins. The dense infrastructural network become the base for a potentially infinitely expandable city.

The industrial revolution lead to the generation of a new kind of city. The new city was based on the idea that time and effort spent on other activities than economical ones, at least outside the domestic environment, was wasted. Three new factors can be regarded as physical generators of the new city: the mine, the factory and the railroad.<sup>1</sup>

1. Mumford, Lewis. The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects. W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2014.

Pp. 14: Advertisement of the Mining Company Andre Dumont in Waterschei

Fig.1: Replacement of the first drilling towers with permanent ones. Waterschei, 1924.



2.Ibid. Mumford, Lewis, pp. 17.

*Fig. 1:* View on the pine forests surrounding the terril of Waterschei. Pines were introduced as source of fuel and construction material for the mining activities. Waterschei, 1967.

When the rest of Belgium was facing industrialization and the rise of the new industrial city, the region of Genk was still unimportant and small. The advent of industrialization and exploitation of resources, in Genk started in 1901 when André Dumont, a Belgian Geologist, discover Coal in the city of As. This event lead to the advent of a series of mining explorations in the Campine Region and eventually three new mining sites were open. Zwartberg, Waterschei and Winterslag with their monumental shafts, worker’s housing and slag heaps became affected by an intense phenomenon of urbanization. This meant the development of an entire new economy for the region, based on coal extraction and commercialization.

If the tendency to the accumulation of capital was already expanding the marketplace and transforming every aspect of urban life into a negotiable commodity, the advent of technological innovation lead to a shift from trade to the exploitation achieved through industrialization. The spread of industrial activities was, perhaps, followed by a modification of the landscape that reflected the loss of form in society and the degradation of the communal sphere. The new industrial society, and consequently the urban environment itself, was based on the creation of an open market for labor and sale of goods (allowed by a permanent insecurity of the laboring masses), the consolidation of dependencies on distant material resources, and a developing market which could be able to absorb the surplus produced by mechanization.<sup>2</sup>





At the roots of industrialization and the changing of society from a rural organization towards an industrial one, lies the new paradigm of rationalization of the territory. Concepts of utility and management substituted the coexistence between man and nature that dominated the rural society. Physiocratic theories, concerned with economic management, opened the way to the rationalization of territory and its infinitely growing exploitation. Such exploitation, however, affect natural resources as well as human labor.

The proto-industrial utopian city of Chaux, designed by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, reflects such mentality. The territory that surrounds the Royal Saltwork, the worker's dwellings, the communal gardens, the productive buildings, everything rotates around the focal point of the Director's House. Management and rationalization are seen as the origin of urban expansion.<sup>3</sup>

The territory becomes seen as an entity to be colonized, whose resources can be infinitely exploited. Marc-Antoine Laugier's comparison of the city to a forest epitomize the dissolution of conceptual, and successively physical, dissolution of the distinction between artificial and natural world.

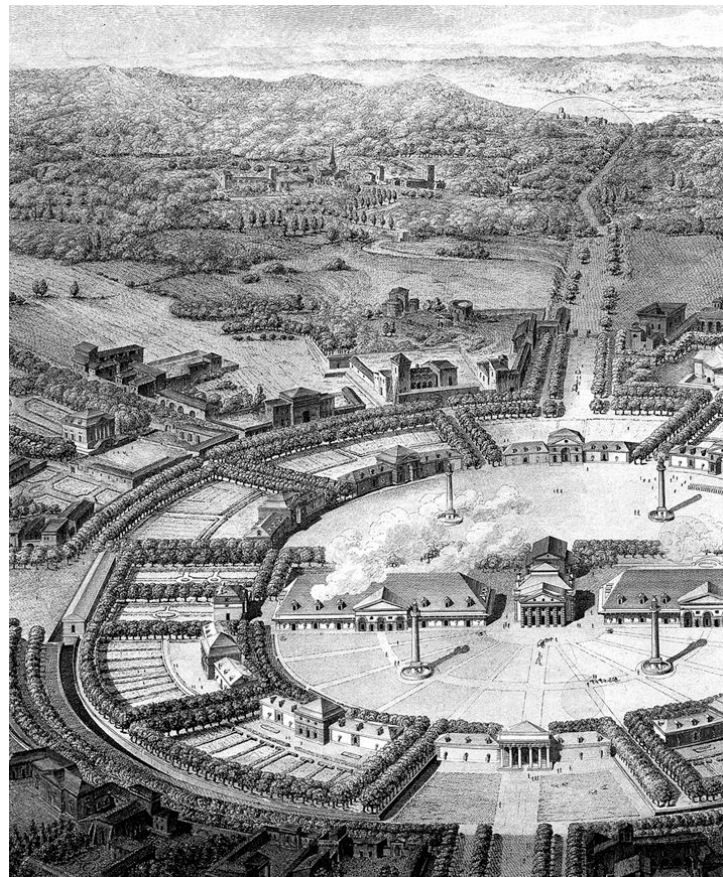
3. Aureli, Pier Vittorio. *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.

4. Tafuri, Manfredo. *Architecture and Utopia Design and Capitalist Development*. MIT Press, 1977.

*Fig.1* The *Primitive Hut* of Marc-Antoine Laugier.

*Fig.2* Bird's eye view of the Royal Saltworks of Arc-et-Senans. The utopian city is developed around the celebration of industrial activity. The central role of the director's house is expressed in the layout that allows visual control over the dwellings of the workers.

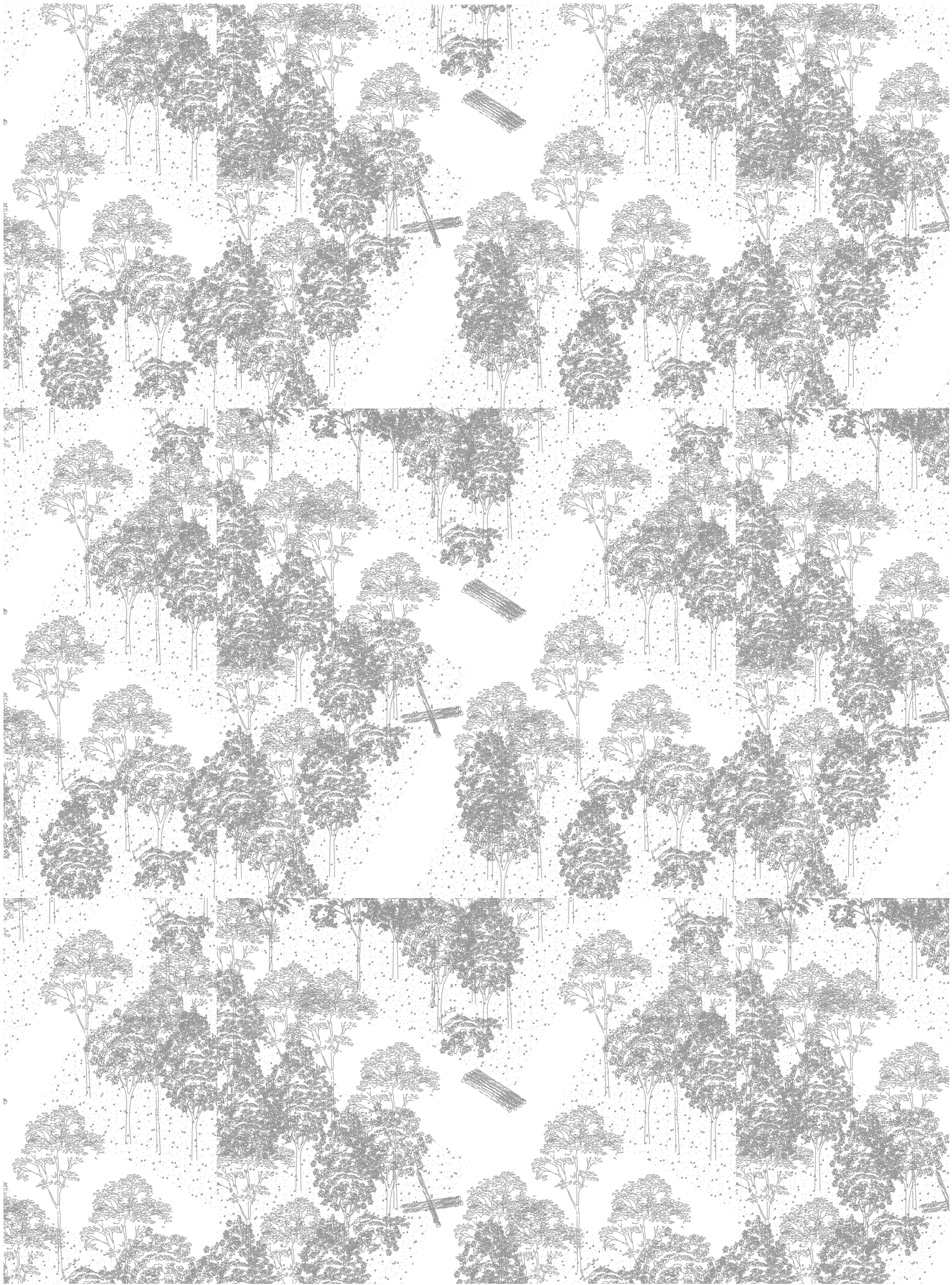
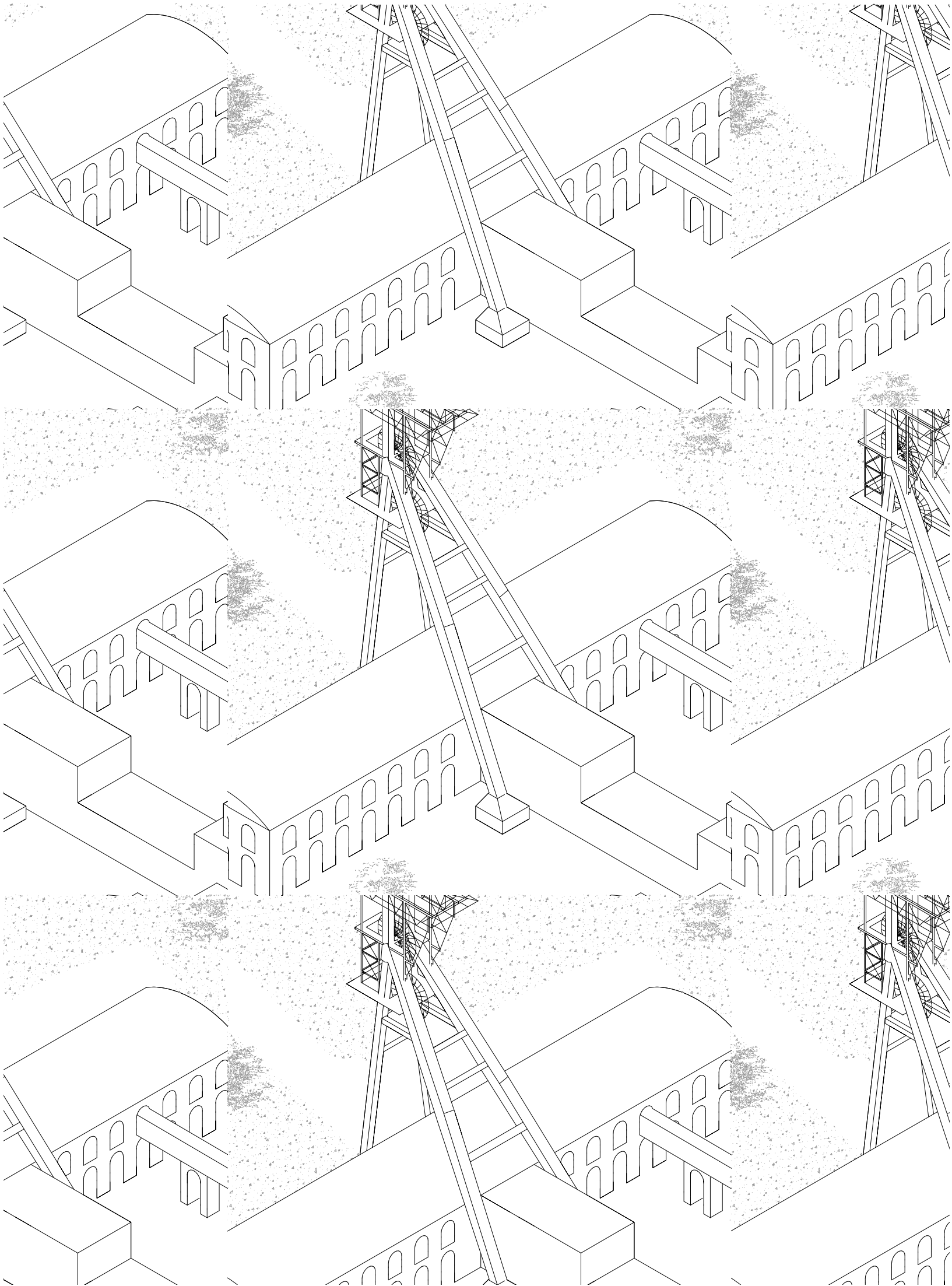
*Pp. 23* Shaft Tower. Still from the propaganda documentary "Het Zwarte Goud Van de Kempen", 1951.



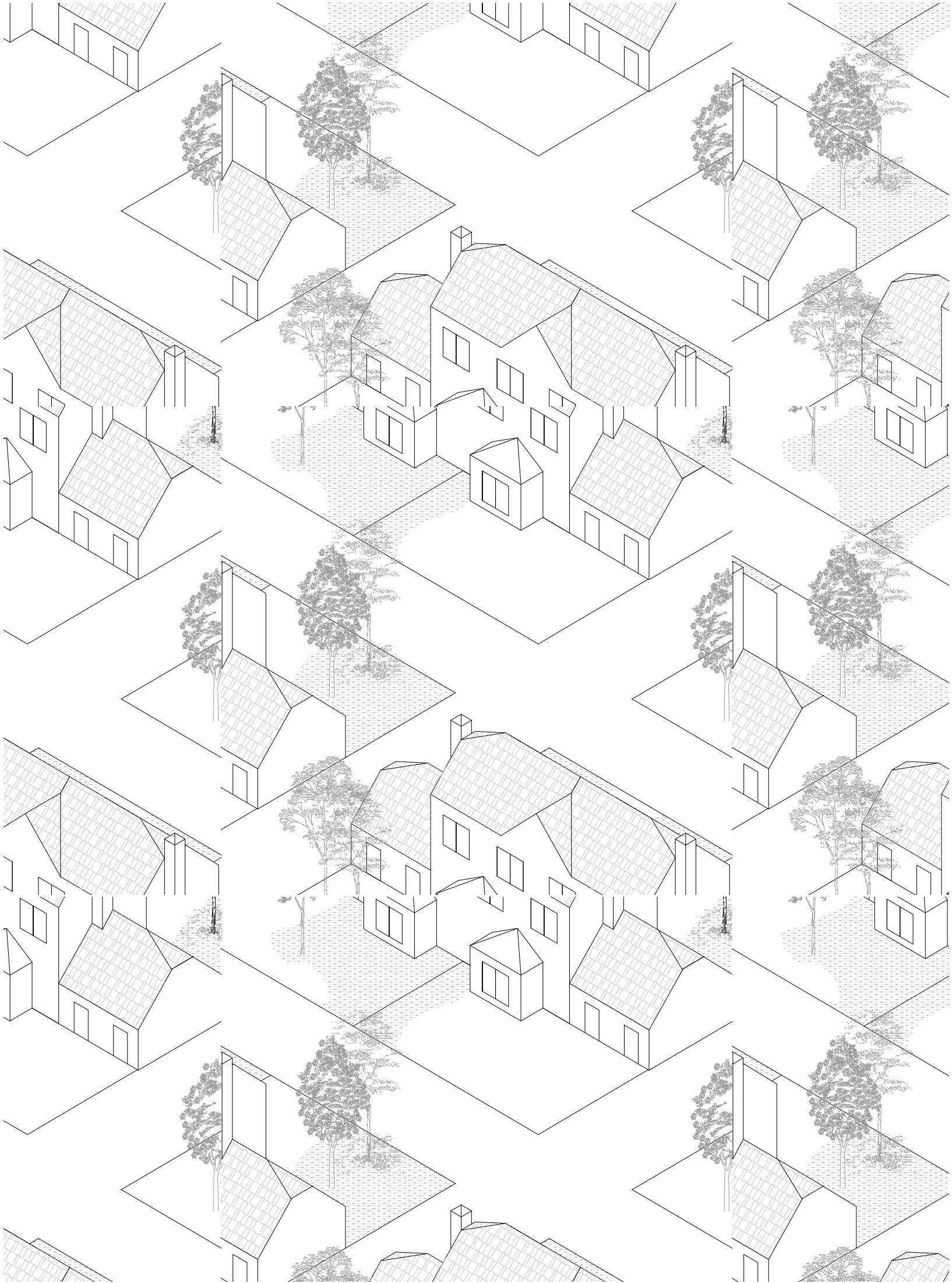
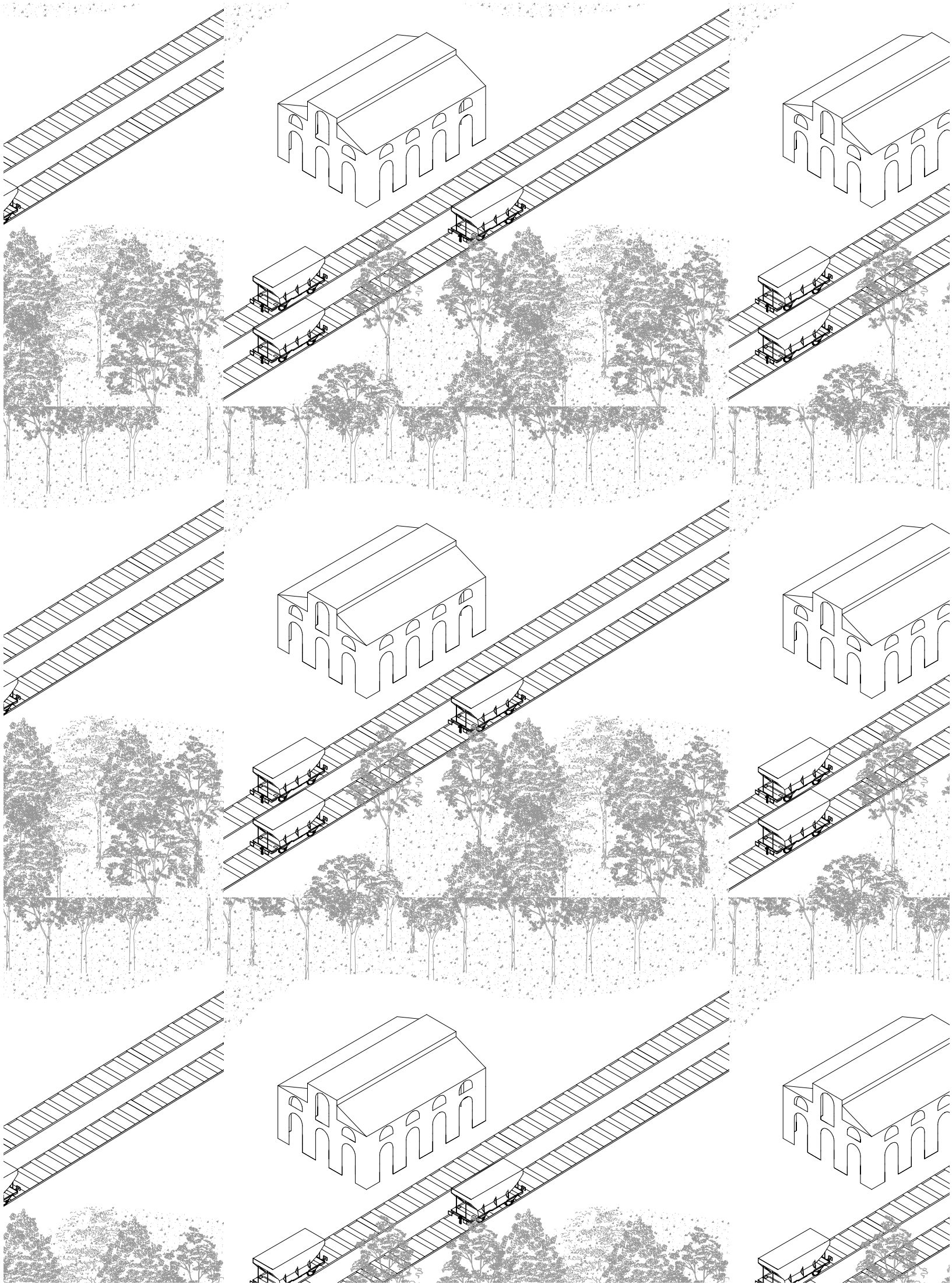
*“The theories of the city advanced by Marc-Antoine Laugier, who compared the design of the city to a forest, and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, whose proto - industrial plan for Chaux: was influenced by the Physiocratic theories of economic management, both reflect the new paradigm of utility and management as the basis of the emerging eighteenth- century metropolis.<sup>4</sup>”*





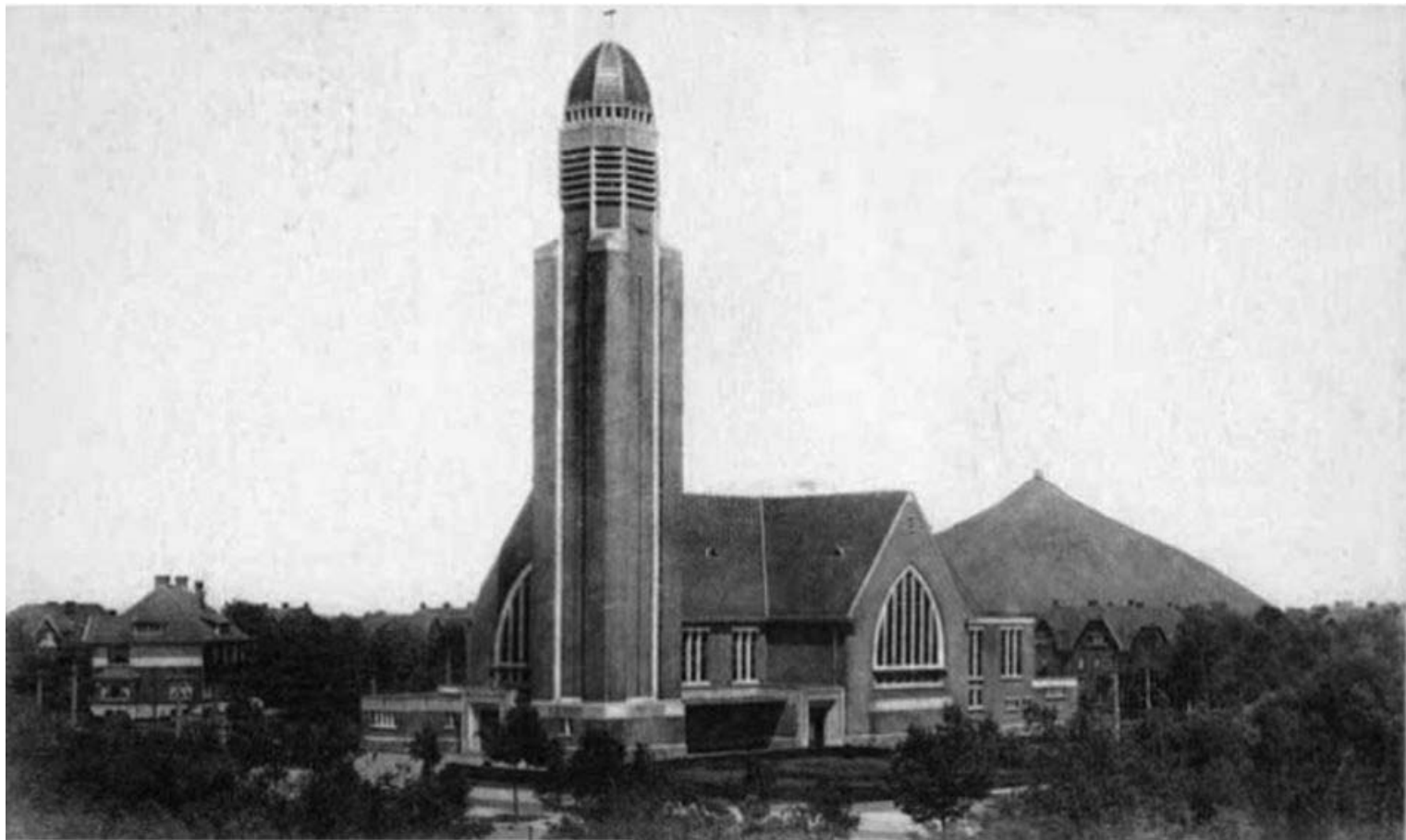












The widespread belief that considered industrialization as a self-regulating system that would reach an ideal equilibrium thanks to the enrichment of every individual economic subject we will call Laissez-Faire. This approach had the effect of limiting the governmental restrictions on economic and spatial development to a minimum. The paradoxes of such an assumption, that became visible during the growth of European industrial towns, lay in the fact that personal freedom can, on the other hand, be achieved only through economic regulations.

The situation of Belgium, in relation to such a contradiction is exemplar. The rural-urban character of many parts of Belgium is the result of cultural convictions, economic processes and political actions. A series of catholic and conservative governments dealt with the problem of urban expansion and industrialization by promoting an anti-urban process of diffusion in the rural territories.

A long lasting campaign of incentives towards home ownership was based on the stimulation of a market that would have enabled individual while preserving traditional values such as that of the patriarchal model of family. The first group of people interested by this governmental attitude were the laboring masses.<sup>1</sup> By developing one of the most dense railway system of Europe, workers could be offered the possibility of a life in the healthy and green environment of the countryside, while commuting every day to the working place. The de-centralization of workers dwellings avoided the possibility of the formation of large workers assemblies that would have threaten the industrial development of the country. This created a solid basis for the following process of post-war suburbanization of the middle-class.

1. Bruno De Meulder, Jan Schreurs, Annabel Cock, Bruno Notteboom, "Patching up the Belgian Urban Landscape", in OASE #52.

2. Mumford, Lewis. The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects. W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2014.

Pp. 28-31 Elements of the industrial landscape in the Campine Region. Drawing by the author.

Fig.2 View on the Miner's church of Waterschei, with the slag heap (Terril) in the background.

Pp.36 Advertising for a Belgian building firm showing the absence of specificity and stylistic anonymity of belgian suburban housing developments, Bruxelles 1933.



“Laissez-faire, even more than absolutism, destroyed the notion of a cooperative polity and a common plan.”<sup>2</sup>

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105,000

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Maisons construites  
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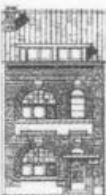
79,500



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62,000



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TERMS

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GARDENS OF DIALECTICS - INDEPENDENT GROUP 2020

GARDENS OF DIALECTICS - INDEPENDENT GROUP 2020

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TERMS



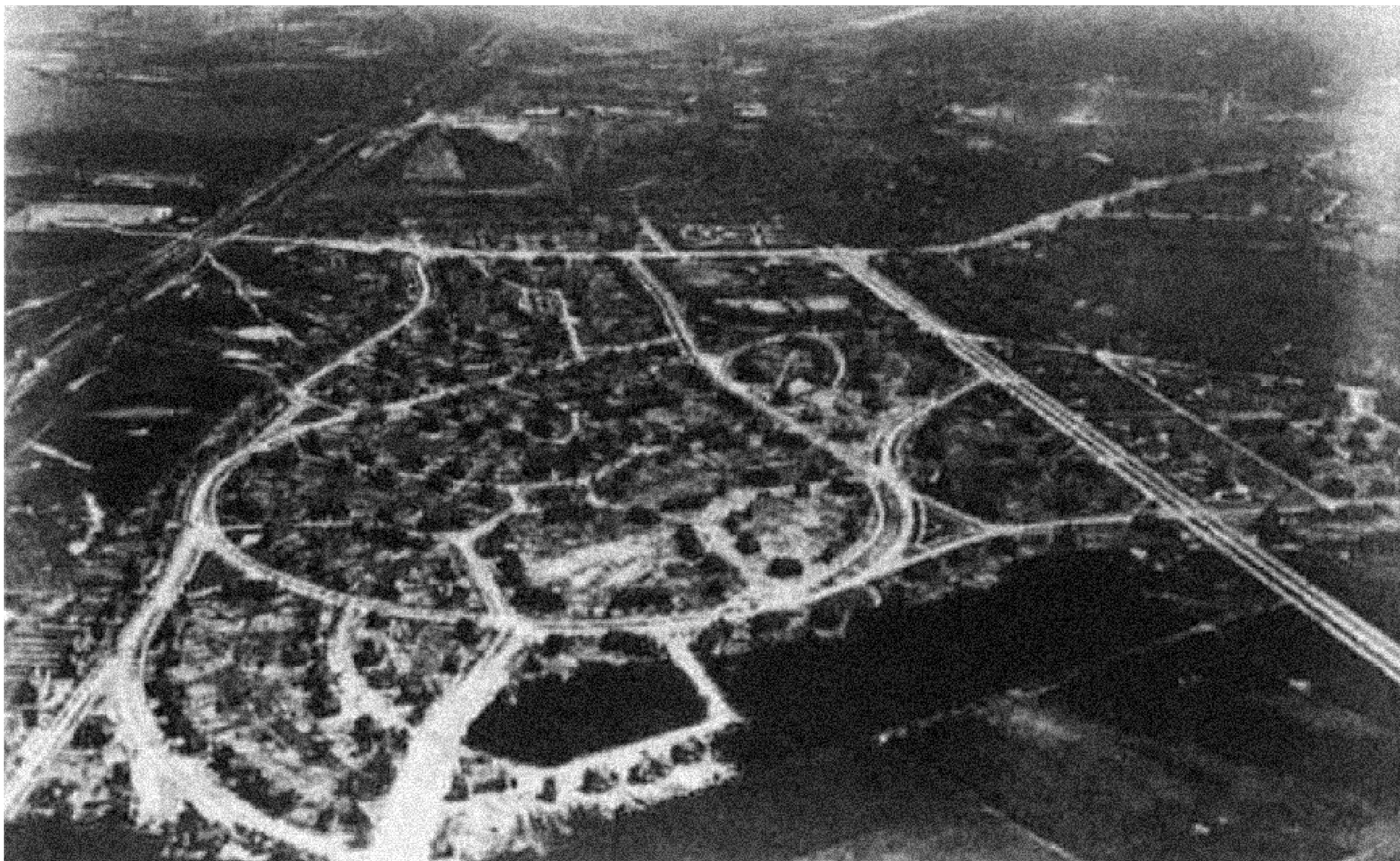
## LIFE IN THE GARDEN: A COLLECTION OF UTOPIAS







*“Forget six counties overhung with smoke,  
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,  
Forget the spreading of the hideous town;  
Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,  
And dream of London, small and white and clean,  
The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green.”<sup>1</sup>*





## THE CITÉ OF WATERSCHEI



Between the Cités<sup>2</sup> of Genk, that of Waterschei appears as a clear figure situated between the open landscape of the heath and forest in the Hoge Kempen and the scattered urbanization of Genk. Initially conceived as infinitely expandable grid, direct representation of an exploitative mentality, the plan that was realized is the reflection of the model of the Garden City. In this plan, behind a surface of attention given towards green and livable space for the workers, lie an extremely efficient layout. The main avenues, A. Dumontlaan and Onderwijslaan, are straight in order to allow an easier control by the police, while the public facilities are situated at the intersections. The plan reflect the clear organization of the working day schedule. While the dwellings are located not further than 1500m from the mine, the latter is hidden behind a line of trees, covering the pollution and noise of the mining activities. Dwellings are standardized based on the Mullhouse model<sup>3</sup> but however containing some elements of variety and carefully composed. The straight grid of the initial plan has been taken over by the (imposed) variety of the curved streets of The Garden City. It is a recognition of the dignity of the worker, but also a victory over the worker itself.<sup>4</sup>

Behind the Cité of Waterschei lies the research for a different society, a utopia based on industrialization and better working conditions. A Utopia for care, but also control. The belief that workers could be more efficient if located in proximity to the working place and at the same time surrounded by the healthy, open landscape of the countryside is connected to a tradition of utopian ideas that becomes relevant to study in order to better understand the logics behind the formation of the Cité of Waterschei. Whether it is a critique to the dense and unhealthy industrialized town or the research for better organized working conditions, the value of utopian thinking consist of an intrinsic political act.

1. Morris, William. The Earthly Paradise. From: Mumford, Lewis. The Story of Utopias. Pinnacle Press, 2017.

2. The term Cité, refers to the villages and small town that were created to dwell the workers of the mine. They were conceived as autonomous islands immersed in the green where every activity was organized and controlled by the mine.

3. The Mullhouse dwellings were developed in the homonymous as standardized dwelling for workers as expression of a philanthropic approach

4. Meulder, Bruno De. De Drie Gedaanten Van Waterschei. Cité Industrielle, Cité Jardin, Banlieu Radieuse. Tijdschrift Voor Geschiedenis Van Techniek En Industriële Cultuur 9, no. 36 (1970). <https://doi.org/10.21825/tgtic.v9i36.7971>

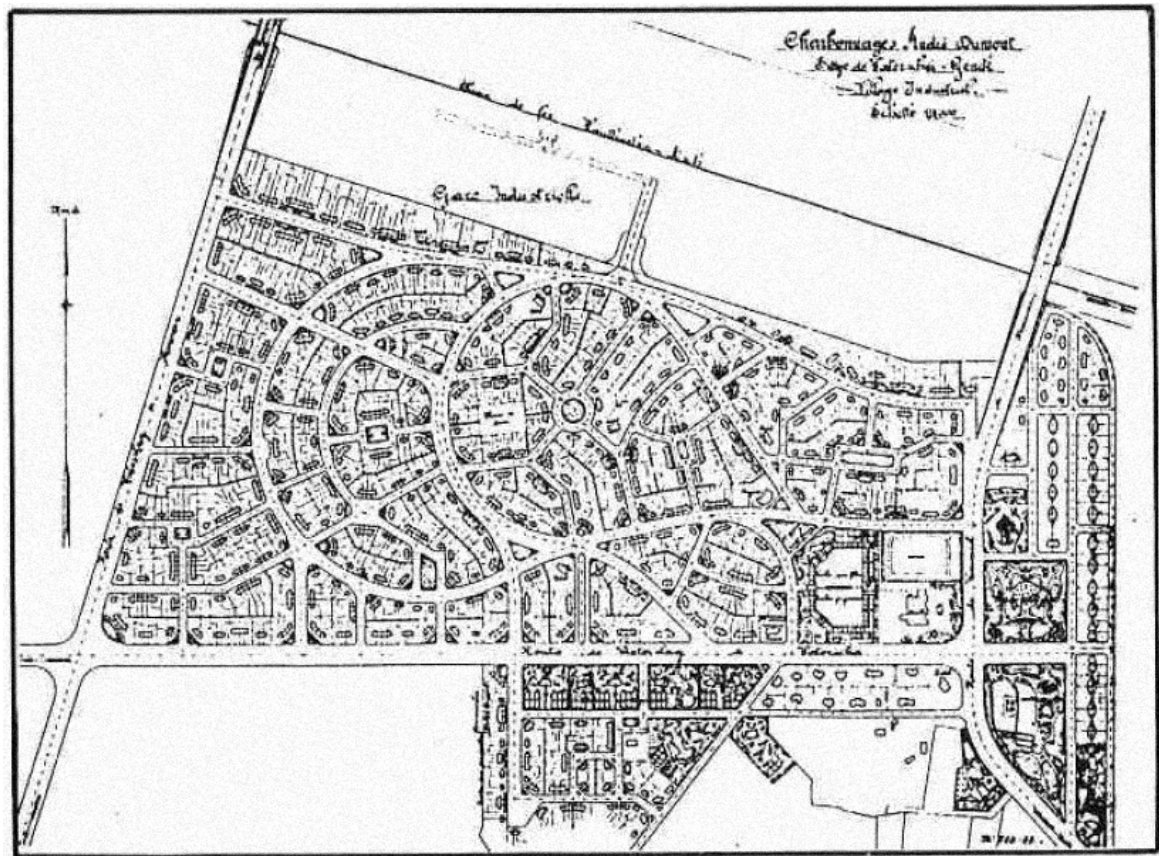
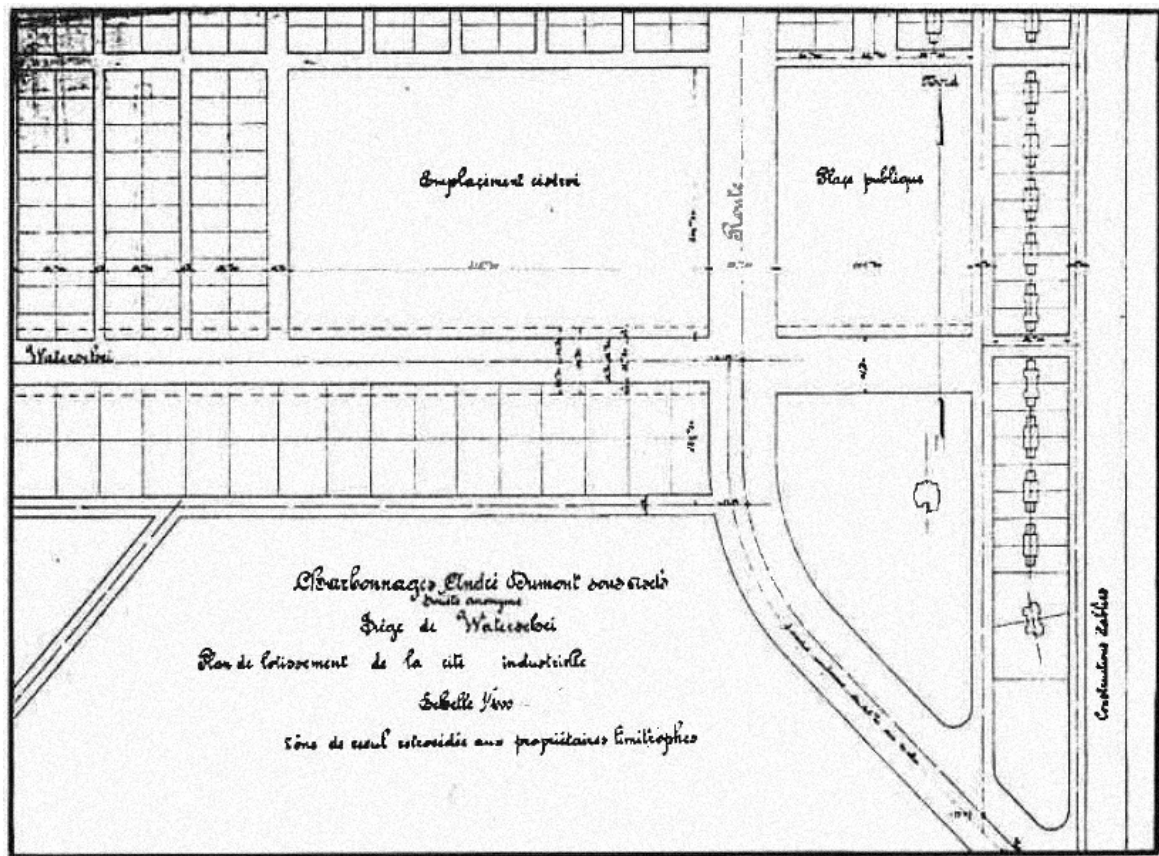
*Pp.38* Drawing showing the idealization of natural landscape in relationship to the speculative development of worker's housing in the Garden City of Waterschei.

*Pp. 42* Pine wood plantation in the Campine Plateau.

*Pp. 44-45* The construction of the Garden City of Waterschei as an imposition of a rational plan over the Campine Landscape.

*Fig.1* Schools, Cultural clubs and social facilities were all managed by the mining company who had complete control over the social life of the workers.





5. Mumford, Lewis. The Story of Utopias. Pinnacle Press, 2017.

Pp.48-49 Initial plan of the Garden City, designed by engineers as potentially expandible grid, and following modification inspired by the Garden City Movement ideals.

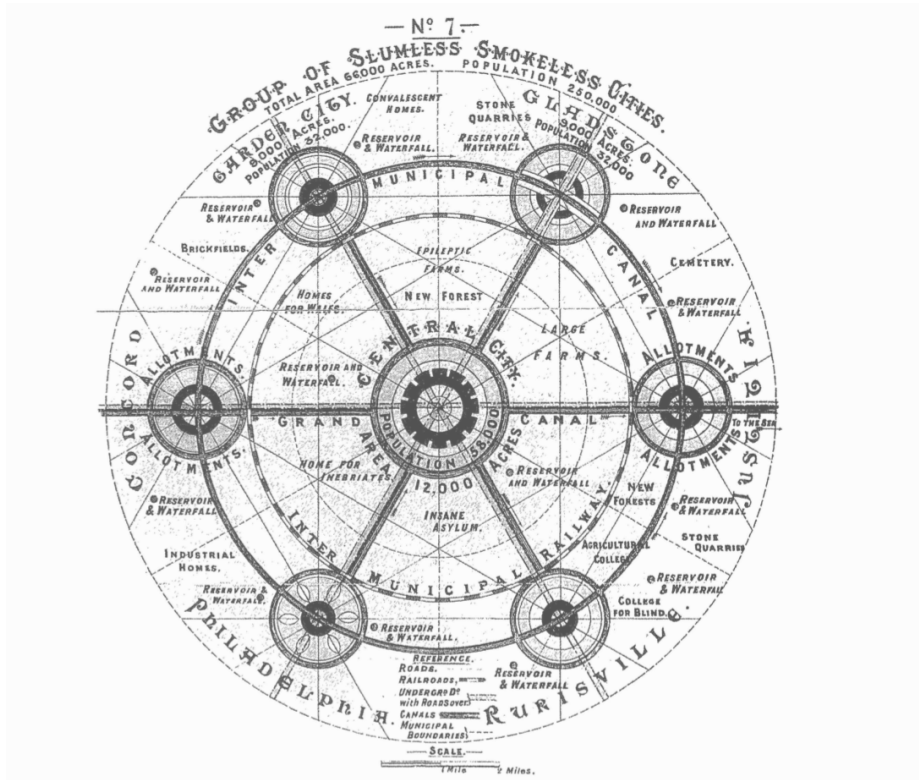
Fig.1 Picture showing a street in the the newly built Garden City.

William Morris, in his description of the Earthly Paradise, identify the qualities of a rural society counterposed to the smoking chimneys of London. A society whose rhythms are not defined by economic pressure and where work is given freely and shared in the community. Since the rules of the market, are almost absent and there is no conception of a consumerist society, people are living a life of leisure. However, Morris specify that is a kind of leisure which is radically different from that of the “Country House” (an idola that will be discussed in the next chapters) and its artificiality.<sup>5</sup> It is a leisure which is connected to a life of labor; in synthesis the life of an artist. In synthesis, the Earthly Paradise described by Morris appears as a portion of territory, where the natural landscape influences the rural society in a way that is dialectically very different from the modern conception. It is the depiction of a society where the cohabitation with the land is not based on a pure mentality of exploitation of resources.





THE GARDEN CITY



The miner’s villages of Genk are the result of a partial interpretation, or an interpretation under the logics of profit, of the Garden City. The idea that decent dwellings for workers could be decentralized in an healthy environment, surrounded by greenery, becomes a way to attract workers into newly built cities in the proximity of the working space, where every aspect of life is controlled and organized in order to reduce frictions to the minimum and increase efficiency.

The work of Ebenezer Howard was, in fact, based on physical planning merely as a means for the realization of an idea of decentralized society where capitalism would be implemented into a system of autonomous and cooperative communities.<sup>1</sup> In this way workers would found a job more easily than in the competitive environment of the industrialized metropolis, thanks to the small, self-contained dimension of the planned rural-urban city. To the Town-Country polarity, the Garden City counterpose a third position. The potential of such settlement was intelligently summarize by the famous “Three Magnets”. The Victorian city was, while being overcrowded, offering society, technological innovation and work opportunities, while on the other hand the countryside was promising fresh air and nature, though without a properly developed work market and social life. The solution of Howard is that of finding the perfect synthesis between the two in a totally different type of settlement.

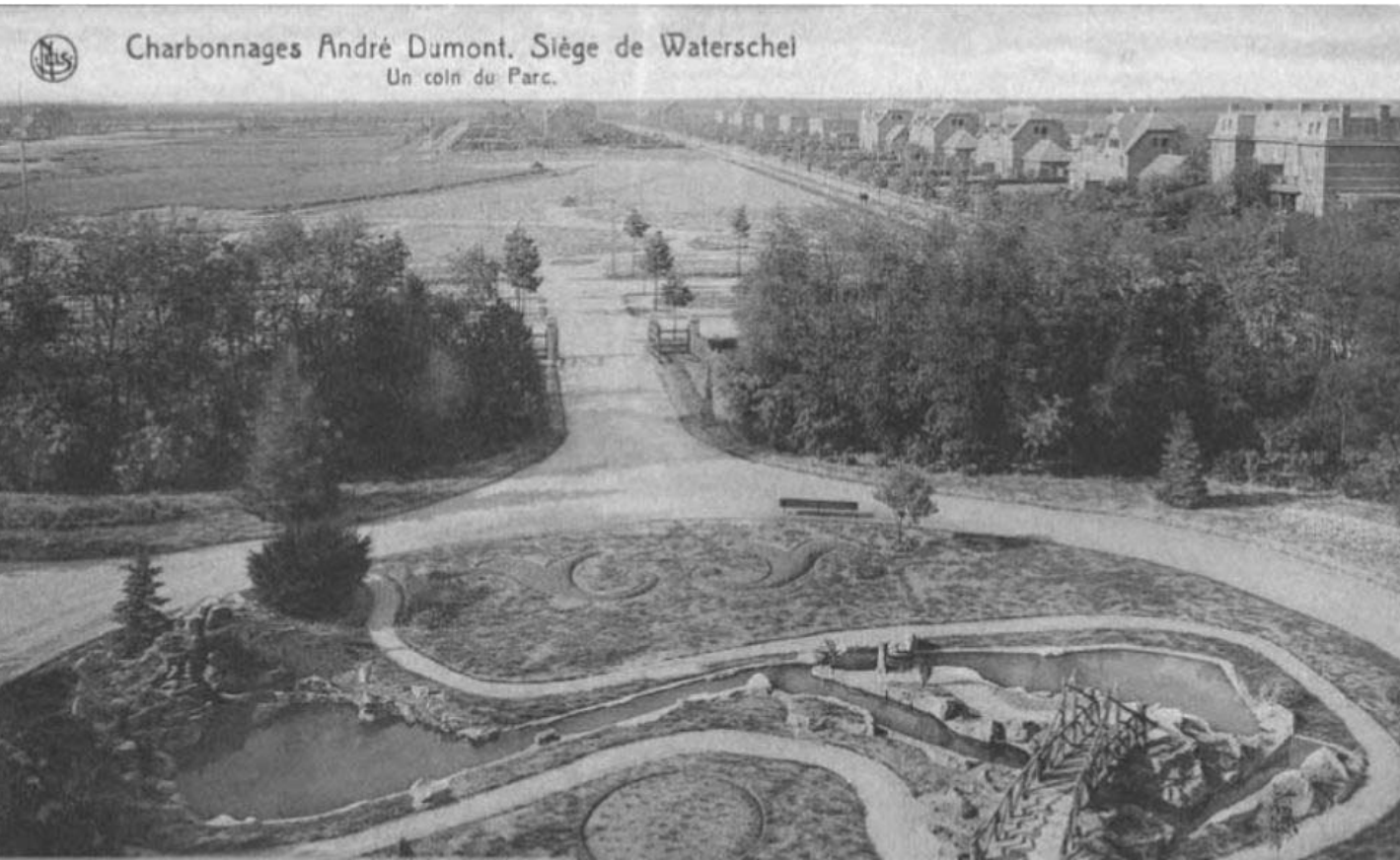
Peter Hall position the idea of the Garden City in continuity with the anarchistic tradition that was developing by the end of the 19th century. He specifically indicate three points. The land is commonly owned and not divided into private lots, eliminating developers speculation and the increase of density in order to raise the price of the value plot. The growth of city and demography is limited by establishing the importance of the human scale, setting limit to the urbanized land and surrounding it with agricultural and recreative land. The activities that take place in the Garden City are balanced by an appropriate mix of functions.<sup>2</sup>

1. Hall, Peter. Cities of Tomorrow. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993.

2. Pimlott, Mark, and Eleonor Jap Sam. Without and within: Essays on Territory and the Interior. Rotterdam: Episode Publ., 2007.

Fig. 1 Drwing of Hebnezer Howard Garden City Model, showing the city as a collection of defined nuclei connected by infrastructures crossing the green and agricultural land.

Fig. 2 The Park as central element in the Garden City.





THE COMPANY TOWN

3. Ibid. Pimlott, Mark. 2007.

4. Ibid. Pimlott, Mark. 2007.

5. Tafuri, Manfredo, and Manfredo Tafuri. Architecture and Utopia Design and Capitalist Development. MIT Press, 1977.

6. Mumford, Lewis. The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects. W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2014.

Fig. 1 The Garden City as a clear element in contrast with the landscape. It is possible to read hierarchies and dependencies from the main buildings of the Mine.

According to Marx, under Capitalistic Modes of production, life itself and his reproduction has become labor power. Life in all its aspects (affective, sentimental, ecc...) has been transformed into a commodity. A commodity is, always according to Marx, defined by an exchange value, meaning that it can be measured and abstracted. Within these terms, labor is abstracted from the worker itself and transformed into an entity with a measured value and consequently supposed to follow the laws of the market.

The transformation of life into a commodity, and subsequently its subjugation to the market’s rules, it physically expressed by The Company Town. The diffusion of Company Towns was enabled by an ever increasing number railway connections. This phenomenon that initially originated in the western territories of the United States, was soon imported in Europe. Belgium, thanks to its dense railway system, became the perfect land for the diffusion of this typologies of settlements. The layouts of Company Towns were organized in such a way than housing was closely related to the working place, allowing an administrative control of a quasi-urban character.<sup>3</sup>

The settlement location was an important element. A land located far from the city center, the Company could easily make use of local natural resources and, more importantly, could effectively control the productivity of manufacturing and extraction sites. The railway was allowing connection to the urban market, while workers could be isolated from ambiguous urban conditions that might have disrupt their productivity.<sup>4</sup>

The Company Town can be seen as a precise system of controlling workers, contributing at the same time to the economic power of industrialists.

The Company Town developed by George Pullman in Chicago condensed the reflections over the problem of the laboring masses with the economic interests of the company itself. The attention given to the well-being of workers was however allowed only by a tabula rasa condition on which a new worker’s life could be built. This condition is the basis for the creation of an almost Utopian model of perfect society, however based on the Director’s philanthropic ideals.



*“Urban naturalism, the insertion of the picturesque into the city and into architecture, as the increased importance given to landscape in artistic ideology all tended to negate the now obvious dichotomy between urban reality and the reality of the countryside. They served to prove that there was no disparity between the value accredited to nature and the value accredited to the city as a productive mechanism of new forms of economic accumulation.”<sup>5</sup>*

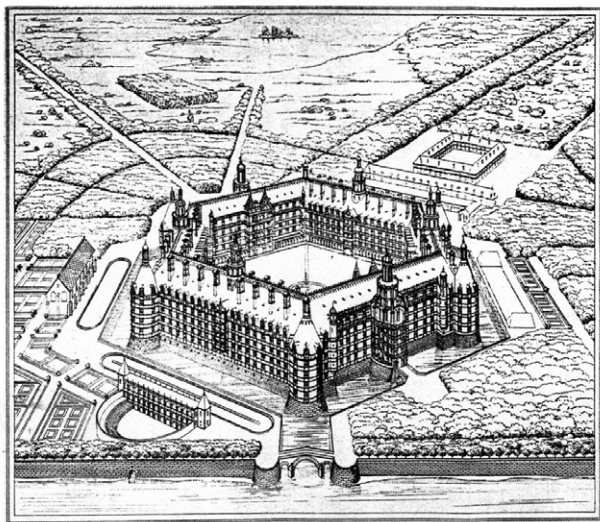




“The first point to be noted is that the land in the garden city is not parceled out into individual ownership : it must be held by the common authority under which it is developed : such increments as may arise through the growth of the garden city must be reserved for the community.” “Not merely did Howard seek to eliminate the private landlord : he eliminated the temptation to increase density in order to raise land values. He likewise did away with instability through irrational or speculative changes in land use.” “The second important characteristic is controlled growth and limited population. The outward limit of urban development was set by Howard’s proposal to surround every garden city by a permanent reserve of open country : to be used either for agriculture or recreation.” “The third notion that Howard introduced as an important attribute of the garden city, no less important than its human scale, was that of functional balance.”<sup>6</sup>







In this chapter I will consider the Country House as an ideal which is part of a similar mechanism of control to that of the Company Town, through a less explicit and more complex mechanism that lay in the achievement of a superficial individual freedom through consumption. As a utopia is based on the reconstruction of a pastoral experience and self-sufficiency as counterposed to the chaos of urban environment. It is the physical manifestation of an autonomous microcosm ruled by the social constraints of the traditional family values.<sup>1</sup>

Historically the rise of the Country House as an ideal can be reconducted to the shift of spiritual and temporal life from the Feudal Society, based on fortification against external dangers, to that of the estate economical power.<sup>2</sup> This process is exemplified by Francois Rabelais's Gargantua, specifically in the description of the Abbey of Theleme.<sup>3</sup> This anti-monastic abbey, with its luxurious private apartments, its Garden of Pleasures, Riding Court, public playhouse and swimming pool, is located in the open country and its interiors are filled with tapestries and art works. Its members, rather than practice poverty, has to be respectably married, rich and live in liberty. It is the liberty of the Abbey of Theleme that one finds also in The Country House.<sup>4</sup>

The life in the Country House is based on privilege and accumulation rather than work. Each single small universe is forced to achieve all the elements for its individualistic good life, rather than achieving them in a communal way. The ideology behind the Country House is that of the happiness of its owner, rather than that of the community.<sup>5</sup> Art is of course contemplated, but not as a product of a communal effort, rather it is object of a passive contemplation. Its architectural elements express the accumulation of "good things", instead of their production. In Belgium the paradoxes of the Country House are expressed by the so called "Farmette", which rather than being actively designed to accommodate agricultural activities, it imitates a farming accent. The car entrance and the greenery reveal its inhabitants distance from the activity of working the land.<sup>6</sup>

The ideal of the Country House, or its Belgian version the "Farmette", has the effect of separating production from the enjoyment of the product, celebrating the latter and excluding the first.

1. Aureli, Pier Vittorio. The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.

2. Manfredo Tafuri. Architecture and Utopia Design and Capitalist Development. MIT Press, 1977.

3. Mumford, Lewis. The Story of Utopias. Pinnacle Press, 2017.

4. Ibid Mumford.

5. Ibid Mumford.

6. Vermeulen, Paul. Countryside in the Nevelstad in: OASE: Journal for architecture, N.60 Urbanism out of Town, Editors: Tom Avermaete, Pnina Avidar, Like Bijlsma, Christoph Grafe, Madeleine Maaskant, Marcel Musch, Marc Schoonderbeek, Lara Schrijver, Mechthild Stuhlmacher, SUN Publishers, 2002

Pp. 56 Engineer's villas surrounded by vegetation. Waterschei, 1956.

Fig.1 Engineer's Villa with garden. Waterschei, 1956.

Fig.2 The abbey of Theleme from Francois Rabelais's Gargantua. Drawing by Charles Nenormant, 1840.





## THE VILLA: LABOUR AND REPRESENTATION

1. Aureli, Pier Vittorio. *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.

2. Pimlott, Mark, and Eleonoor Jap Sam. *Without and within: Essays on Territory and the Interior*. Rotterdam: Episode Publ., 2007.

3. Aureli, Pier Vittorio, Martino Tattara, Martin Stiehl, Jessica Sehr, Jeronimo Voss, Martin Hager, Christian Hiller, et al. *Dogma Realism Working Group - Communal Villa: Production and Reproduction in Artists Housing*. Leipzig: Spector Books, 2015.

*Pp. 62-63 Suburban "Farmettes". Source: Dogma, Wonen in de rand van Nationaal Park Hoge Kempen, 2017.*

[https://issuu.com/toplimburg/docs/16\\_park\\_city\\_dogma\\_a9c377bcb79d20/3](https://issuu.com/toplimburg/docs/16_park_city_dogma_a9c377bcb79d20/3)

*Fig.1 Villa Emo, Andrea Palladio, 1570.*

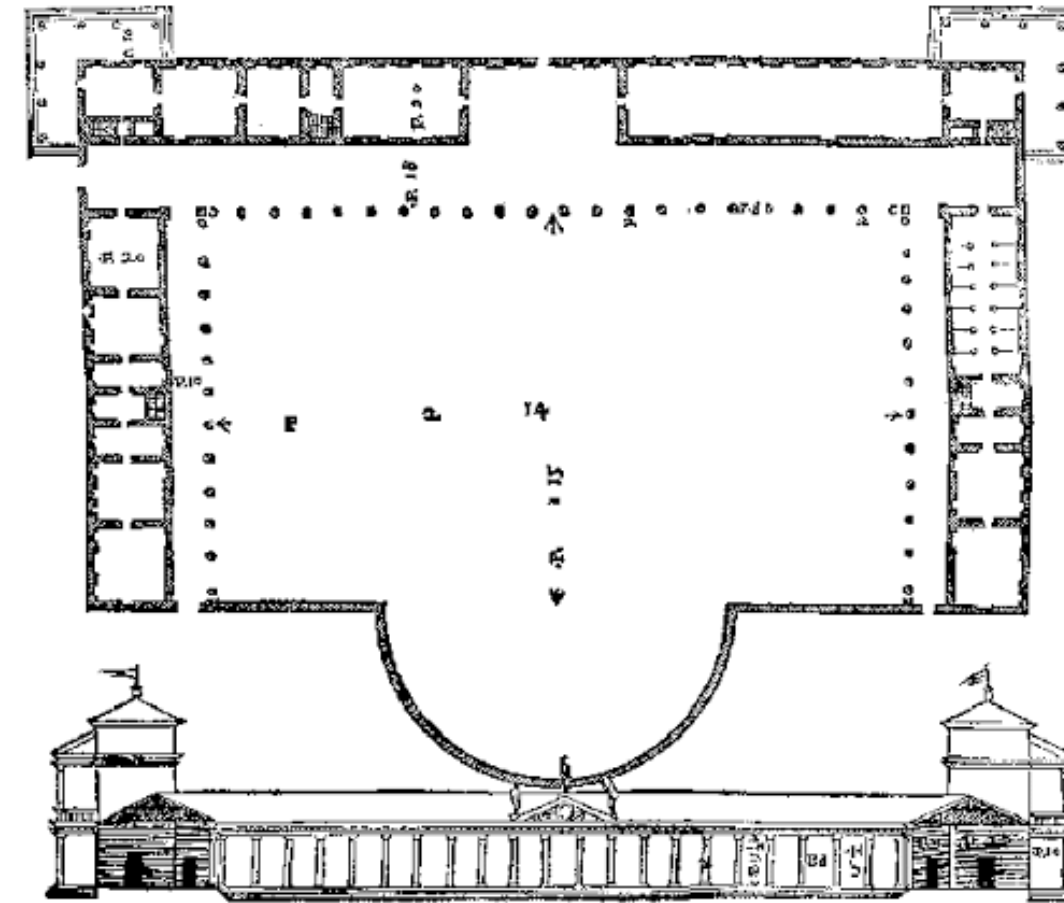
*Fig.2 Villa Capra "La Rotonda", in a picture from Colin Rowe *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa*, 1976.*

In "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa", published by Colin Rowe on the architecture of Andrea Palladio in comparison with that of LeCorbusier, reveal the possibility of a formal legitimation that goes beyond the rules provided by the only use of functionalist modernist approach. The loggias of Palladian Villas are derived from local Venetian agricultural sheds as essential component of contextualization and distinction. The Villa, rather than a palace, celebrates agricultural work and its relationships with the territory.<sup>1</sup>

The use of classicism in his Villas is both a mean of celebration of authority and a collection of simple and readable architectural elements that can generate urbanity city itself. The celebrative aspect of classicism was, in fact, lately adopted by Thomas Jefferson as basis for the foundation of the new American civic life.<sup>2</sup>

Tafuri moreover, describes how the Monticello Villa can be conceived as a monument to agrarian utopia, that reveal the values on which Jefferson based his politics.

The idea of Villa and it's representations are contradictory if related to the sphere of work. As Commonly the villa is seen as a place for escaping the dirtiness and ambiguity of the material production, this creates the clear separation between work and labor defined by Arendt<sup>3</sup>, and the illusion of domesticity as refugee from the reality of work. The Palladian Villas represent, on the other hand an idea of domestic environment explicitly engaged with the realm of production in the agricultural work.





THE SOCIAL PALACE:  
RE-PRODUCTION OF  
SOCIETY



The Garden City of Howard and the examples that were realized applying his theories, can be placed in continuity with the work of a series of enlightened industrialists and sociologists that engaged with alternatives to the individualism of industrial society by proposing architectural typologies. All of them were dealing with Utopia, however there is a common sense of participation into the faith for scientific thinking.

A utopia that was strongly bounded with the reality of industrialized world is that of Robert Owen. His self-sufficient industrial community called “New Harmony”, was based on the idea of honest labor and education and gave birth to different experiments in the inexhaustible territory of America. The founding of a different society, corresponding to a certain urban composition, was the intellectual base for the activity of Thomas Jefferson.<sup>1</sup>

The utopia of Buckingham, plan for a colony named Victoria, reflect the ideals of Bourgeoisie, rather than that of the soldier, the farmer and the artisan. In this sense Buckingham is part of that culture of philanthropic associations interested in the building of dwellings for the poor, suburban villages that would take the laboring masses out of the ambiguous atmosphere of the town.<sup>2</sup>

Buckingham’s Victoria it’s an attempt to start a new society from a land of nothingness. The development of a community as a whole, detached from the chaotic state of the industrial city. The city was of limited size and surrounded by 10.000 acres of farmland. The property of land and tools is that of the company and not of any individual. Education is be undertaken by the community. The Victorian utopia leave the realm of artistic imagination towards a scientific appreciation of reality. In this passage, something is gained and something is lost.<sup>3</sup>

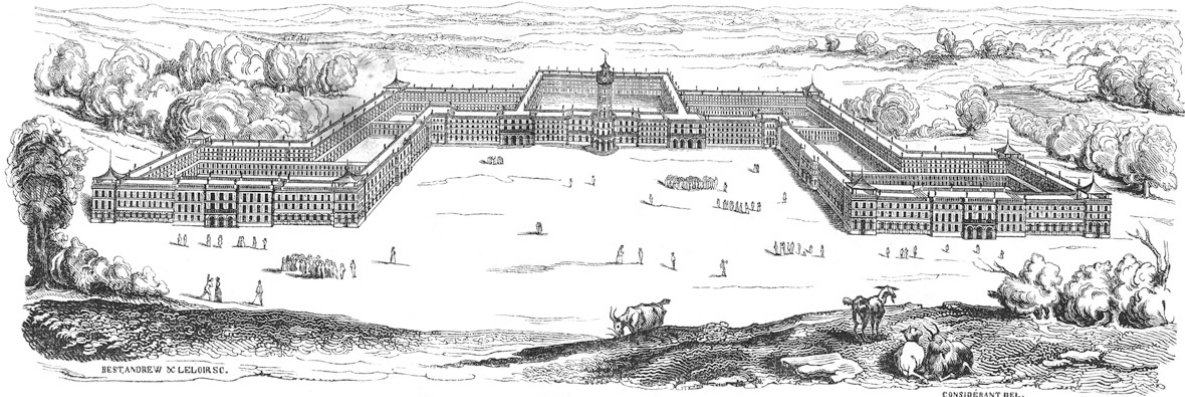
1. Tafuri, Manfredo, and Manfredo Tafuri. Architecture and Utopia Design and Capitalist Development. MIT Press, 1977

2. Mumford, Lewis. The Story of Utopias. Pinnacle Press, 2017.

3. Ibid. Mumford.

Fig.1 Worker’s cultural club “De Kring”. Waterschei, 1930 ca.

Fig.2 Landscape view of the Phalanstere designed by Charles Fourier.





1. Pimlott, Mark, and Eleonoor Jap Sam. *Without and within: Essays on Territory and the Interior*. Rotterdam: Episode Publ., 2007.

2. Mumford, Lewis. *The Story of Utopias*. Pinnacle Press, 2017.

3. Ibid. Pimlott, Mark, 2007

*Fig.1* Group of Scholars photographed at the edge between the forest and the Garden City. Waterschei, 1930 ca.

The most influential utopian thinker was Charles Fourier. His project for a Social Palace is of particular importance, especially because of its engagement with finding out what human nature is rather than modifying it. The ideal new society of Fourier was based on the refuse of bourgeois social paradigms, such as private property and marriage, tending to a real emancipation of human being, achieved through communitarian life.<sup>1</sup>

The formal representation of the social palace and his ideal society is relatable to that of Versailles. The palace is divided in three wings, corresponding to Material, Social and Intellectual domains. The Social is in the middle, facing a parade court. An observation tower allows to organize the surrounding agricultural territory and communicate with the other phalanxes.<sup>2</sup>

An important role was given to the glazed arcadian interior of the communal space that recalls the scenic and evocative role as dream-world that Walter Benjamin described in the early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>





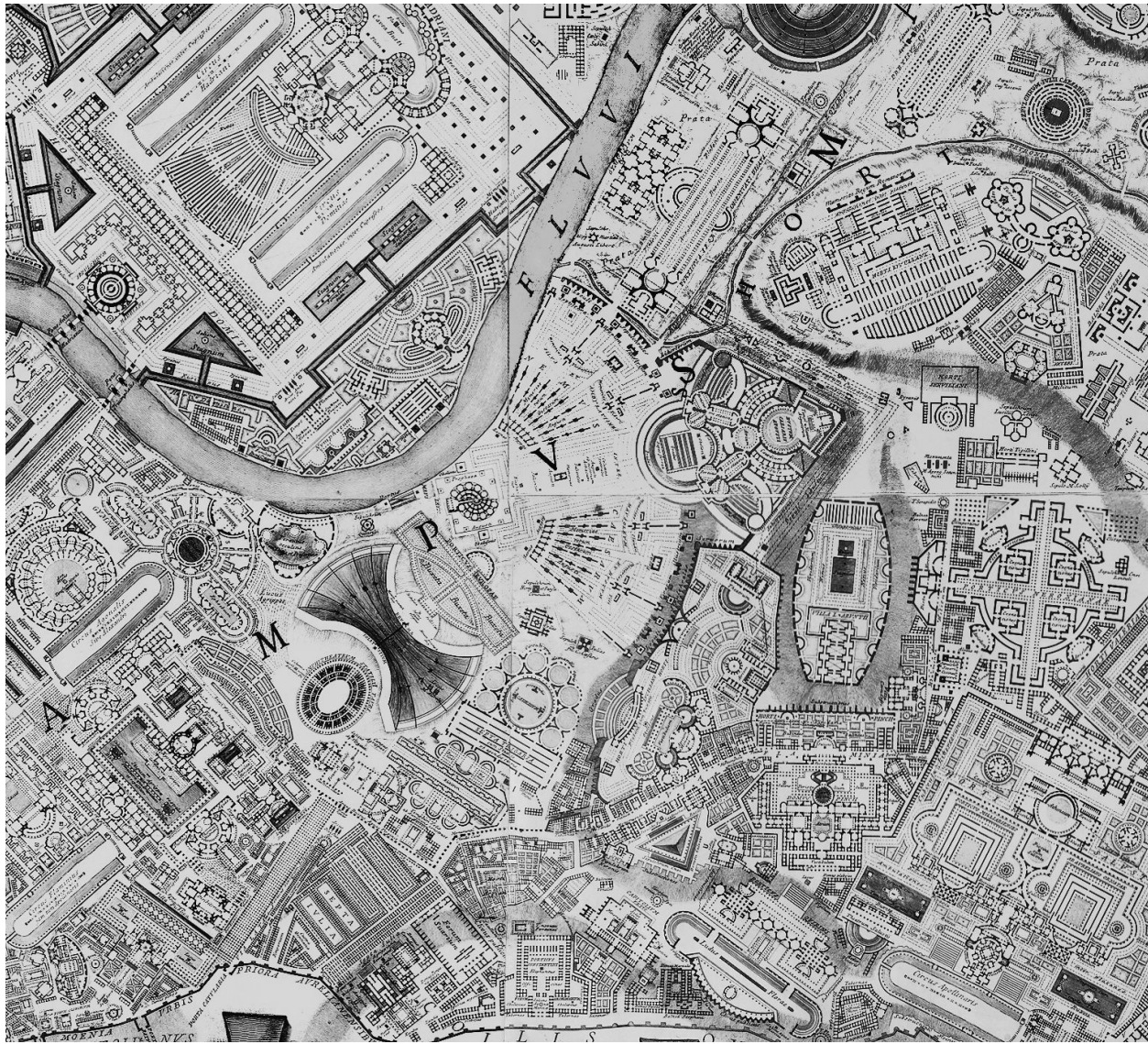
GARDENS OF  
DIALECTICS







*“Essentially it is the struggle between architecture and the city, between the demand for order and the will to formlessness, that assumes epic tone in Piranesi’s Campo Marzio.”<sup>1</sup>*







In Genk, the crisis started in 1966, when the mine of Zwartberg closed. Following that moment the other two mines, that of Winterslag and Waterschei, were closed in 1986 and 1987. The economic crisis, that officially took place in 1973, did not however affected the public housing programs for some years until, during the 1980s a series of budget cutting was determined. What followed was the continuation of the policy of expansion of the city without however the construction of good access roads and public facilities.<sup>2</sup> The process of expansion had to face, on the other hand, an inverse phenomenon of decay and abandonment of parts of the city that is today still the predominant tendency. Finally, in 2014 Ford Body and Assembly Genk, the largest employer of the city, decided to de-localize the production.

The Iconographiam Campi Martii Antique Urbis in Rome by Giovanni Battista Piranesi describes the contradictions of a city where, similarly to Genk, decay and order coexist. The drawing describes the conditions of Rome that, similarly to the post-industrial city, is facing a process of abandonment of its monuments. The City of Rome is represented as condemned and at the same time liberated by the realm of reason, namely the industrial town.<sup>3</sup> It is a representation of the contradictions implied in the promises of enlightenment and industrialization. Society is liberated by traditional values and will have to face a condition where order and chaos cohabit in the urban environment.

The role of Architecture in such conditions has abandoned his traditional position of stable entity giving structure to society and the city. Regarding the city itself merely as the outcome of technological production, architecture has been relegated to the role of a link in the production chain. Within these conditions the city become an infinitely expandable entity, producible and reproducible, where the project of equilibrium become utopian.<sup>4</sup> However the process of growth has stopped, and this open the way to new considerations over architecture and its role in a process of decay rather than growth. Where the controlling power of industrial reason stops to exists the vital forces of the natural landscape, once perceived as an object for profit, returns as a predominant figure.

The Garden Cities of Genk, are the demonstration that growth and decline, expansion and shrinking, building and demolishing are inextricably connected. The financial crisis and the stagnation of investments has a major impact on the planning of the city. Empty buildings are often too expensive to refurbish

1. Tafuri, Manfredo. Architecture and Utopia Design and Capitalist Development. MIT Press, 1977.

2. Ryckewaert, Michael "The Minimal Rationality of Housing Patterns in Flanders' Nevelstad" OASE: Journal for architecture, N.60 Urbanism out of Town, Editors: Tom Avermaete, Pnina Avidar, Like Bijlsma, Christoph Grafe, Madeleine Maaskant, Marcel Musch, Marc Schoonderbeek, Lara Schrijver, Mechthild Stuhlmacher, SUN Publishers, 2002

3. Ibid. Tafuri

4. Ibid. Tafuri

Pp. 70 Ruins of an ancient medieval tower transformed into a park. Waterschei, 1930 ca.

Pp. 72-73 Demolition of the mining buildings. Waterschei, 1987.

Pp. 74 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Ichnographiam Campi Martii Antiquae Urbis, 1757.

Fig. 1 Abandoned worker's barracks in Texaswijk. 1990 ca.

Fig.2 "I saw far off an incredibly tall structure in the form of a tower or high watch-tower, next to a great building that was not yet fully visible but seemed to be a work of antiquity." Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, Francesco Colonna, 1499.



5. Easterling, Keller. Subtraction. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014.

6. Ibid. Easterling, 2014.

7. Pimlott, Marc. The Public Interior as Idea and Project. Heijningen: Jap Sam Books, 2016.

8. Schubert, Hannah, Mark Minkjan, and Leo Van. Broeck. Tweede Natuur: Een Langzame, Natuurlijke Transformatie Als Alternatief Voor Sloop. Amsterdam: in eigen beheer, 2018.

Fig.1 The demolition of the abandoned worker's Barraks in Texaswijk. Watershcei, 1990 ca.

Pp. 80-81 Construction works for the speculative housing estate of Nieuw Texas. Waterschei, 1990 ca.

or repurpose and the only contemplated solution is that of demolition. Demolition is always bringing together a series of contradictory information<sup>5</sup>. The politics of the tabula rasa involves the intention of developing renewed hopes and economic growth, often responding to the same logic of exploitation that brought to the present ruins. The demolition for creating a tabula rasa, contemplate the clearing of the space as an opportunity for erasing the obsolescent architecture, so that a better or renewed one can be built without obstacles.<sup>6</sup> This reflect the modern mentality of land exploitation and erasure of an existing system in order to generate a new, more economically productive, one. However, demolition can also be considered as an act of creating space. The activity of subtraction, in cases of cities such as Genk, is one of the main processes actuated by the municipality. It can then represent an opportunity for architecture to perceive it as an operative practice rather than an instrument erasing an obsolescent past.

When demolition doesn't take place, then long-term vacancy lead to a process of decay and ruination. Since the beginning of modernity, with its intrinsic constant transformation of the world, ruins have always had a poetic attraction.<sup>7</sup> Ruins reveals ideas and ambitions of the past, while they can be appreciated in a state of decay, while being re-conquered by the natural state. Ruins are records of our own mortality, a reminder of a process of disappearance.

The acceptance of decay, however, is not part of our culture of growth and progress, a mentality that find its roots in the industrial revolution and in the assumptions of modern thought.<sup>8</sup> Decline and failure are often excluded by our social and economic systems, hiding and forgetting portions of the city that once were part of a spirit of progress. Accepting decay, force us to confront with the phenomenon of failure. The failure of the mines, of industrialization, of social utopias and finally of city planning.

The situation of Genk, as many other post-industrial city, is representative of a community that cohabit with abandonment. Rather than considering the abandoned plots as objects to be gained by a rational plan, this can open the way to a different position. Instead of conceiving decay as a failure, the lack of control of such portions of city along with their absence of program can give space to a different coexistence between society and the natural landscape. Ruins are part of our collective memory.<sup>9</sup> The coexistence of society with ruins can create a new value that overcome the logic of economic profit.

9. Schubert, Hannah, Mark Minkjan, and Leo Van. Broeck. Tweede Natuur: Een Langzame, Natuurlijke Transformatie Als Alternatief Voor Sloop. Amsterdam: in eigen beheer, 2018.









1. Ryckewaert, Michael “The Minimal Rationality of Housing Patterns in Flanders’ Nevelstad” OASE: Journal for architecture, N.60 Urbanism out of Town, Editors: Tom Avermaete, Pnina Avidar, Like Bijlsma, Christoph Grafe, Madeleine Maaskant, Marcel Musch, Marc Schoonderbeek, Lara Schrijver, Mechthild Stuhlmacher, SUN Publishers, 2002

2. Verbeken, Pascal, and Jimmy Kets. Somewhere City: Een Stadspportret Van Genk. Antwerpen: Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, 2014.

Fig.1 Abandoned rowhouse and reclamation by wild plants. Waterschei, 2019. Source: GoogleEarth

What happens when the city is not the most important figure anymore? When its life and energies are not focused on a process of expansion but rather on that of shrinking?

The Belgian province of Limburg, where the city of Genk is situated, is today facing a series of challenges related to its economical and demographical recession. The cities are left, year after year, by its youngest and wealthiest inhabitants, while buildings and facilities are abandoned and left to demolitions or decay.<sup>1</sup>

As a perfect example of Garden City, conceived as an autonomous island, Waterschei appears not anymore as a clear figure imposed over the landscape but on the contrary starts to include and accept those portions of the landscape over which has been planned and imposed. Waterschei, as many others Mining Cité, has been conceived, designed and built as an urban island within a sea of natural landscape. Every activity, from work to the public life was directly or indirectly “produced” by the mine.<sup>2</sup> However, the conclusion of the mining activities is now leaving an empty space which is progressively being filled by that natural landscape that has been, for many years, pushed outside the boundaries of the Cité. The island is returning back to the sea.

This process of progressive abandonment and decay allows, however, to switch the focus over another primary entity of this territory. The landscape, that has been constantly modified, eroded and exploited by industrial activities is today reclaiming back its portions of the city. Composed by a variety of ecosystems, plants and animals is reappearing as the predominant element in the process of the city’s shrinking. The possibilities that are embedded in the decay and reforestation of parts of the Garden City, allows to re-think architecture in its social value and as a productive (or re-productive) activity. An approach that is radically different from the modern one, regarding the way architecture is built and designed is then required.





3. Latour, Bruno. A Cautious Prometheus?: a Few Steps toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk). Cornwall: Design History Society Falmouth, 2008.

Fig. 1-2 Demolition of rowhouse in 2010 and reclamation by wild plants in 2019.  
Source: GoogleEarth

Bruno Latour’s Cautious Prometheus gives a relevant definition of what an anti-modern approach to design might be:

*“What no revolution has ever contemplated, namely the remaking of our collective life on earth, is to be carried through with exactly the opposite of revolutionary and modernizing attitudes. This is what renders the spirit of the time so interesting... the revolution has to always be revolutionized... the new “revolutionary” energy would be taken from the set of attitudes that are hard to come by in revolutionary movements: modesty, care, precautions, skills, crafts, meanings, attention to details, careful conservations, redesign, artificiality, and ever shifting transitory fashions. We have to be radically careful, or carefully radical... What an odd time we are living through.”*<sup>3</sup>

Assuming this position allows us to identify, outside of the interiors of private suburban houses, another interior. A large interior of collective life. The landscape, and the care of its elements, rather than its exploitation, reveals possibilities of coexistence rather than ownership and consumption.

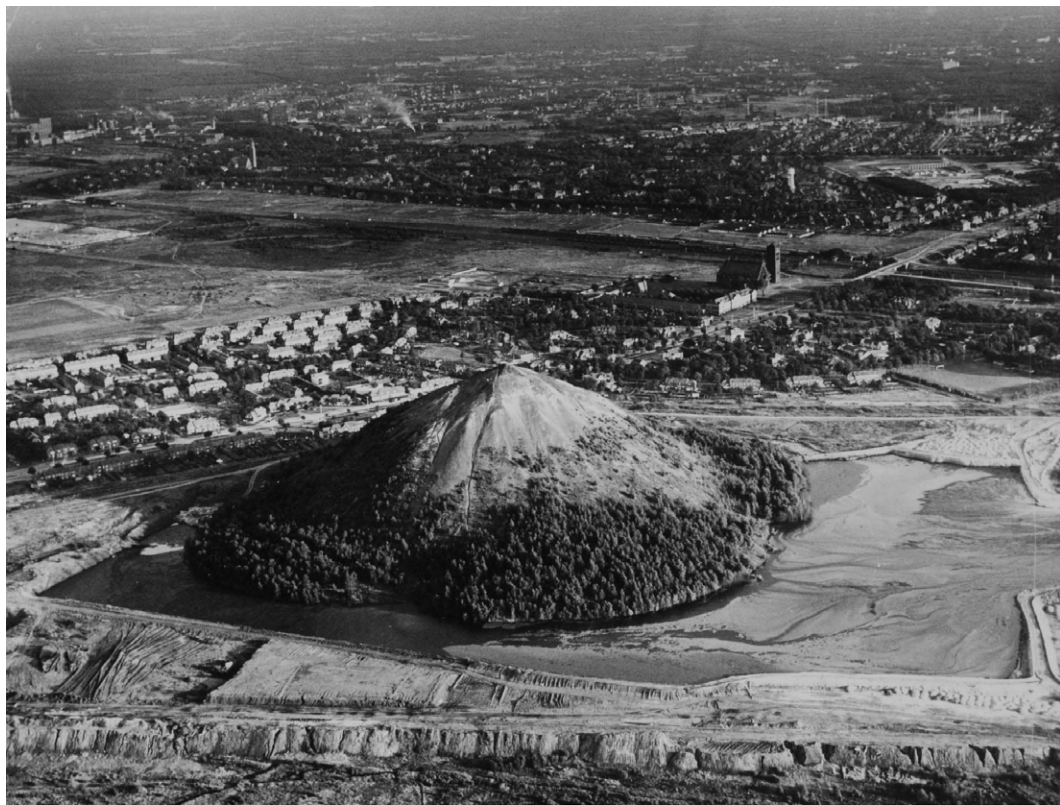








LANDSCAPE AS  
DIALECTICAL PROCESS



The idealized nature that constitute the surface of the Garden City, under which the most rational modalities of exploitation takes place, can be placed in continuity within the ideal of the romantic “picturesque”. The term refers to an approach to architecture and landscape where the garden and the country house would be conceived together in one coherent architectural fiction.<sup>1</sup> Architecture dominates the landscape, a landscape that is meticulously designed for being close to a (fake) state of ‘naturalness, by including as many “ruins” as possible.

When talking about Frederick Law Olmsted design of Central Park, the American artist Robert Smithson points at a series of contradictions involved in idea of “the picturesque”. In the essay Friedrich Law Olmsted and The Dialectical Landscape, published on Artforum in 1973, Smithson identify the position of the designer of Central Park, as the alternative to the dangerous idealization of the “Picturesque”. By describing Olmsted designs as “pieces of Jeffersonian rural reality into the metropolis”,<sup>2</sup> Smithson juxtapose a dialectic materialist view, to the identification of nature as an object of contemplation, typical of the romantic approach. Following this logic, the forest within the city, cannot be considered merely as “a thing in itself” but needs to be seen in his relationships with a physical region, becoming “a thing for us”.<sup>3</sup> The figure of Olmsted’s Parks can then be regarded as pieces of active landscape that acts as an infrastructure for the city. The context where Olmsted design his parks is that of a 19th century continuously growing American city where he is already able to read the transformation of the countryside into an urban realm. The American territory was undergoing a process of urbanization through the construction of roads that would “connect the wood-lots to the railway station while being accompanied by speculator’s plans”<sup>4</sup>.

At the very roots of economical speculation over the natural landscape, lay the fact of considering it as a “thing in itself”. Such a position, in relation to the active creative and destructive processes of the natural environment, lead to the “clearing” of the landscape as a reaction to decay. It is the *tabula rasa*, described by Keller Easterling in *Subtraction*<sup>5</sup>, as capable of attracting other economic investments under the form of new, “updated” buildings, or as in the case of Hantz Woodlands in Detroit, “green” regeneration projects<sup>6</sup>.

1. Pimlott, Marc. The Public Interior as Idea and Project. Heijningen: Jap Sam Books, 2016.

2. Smithson, Robert, Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape, in Artforum, February, 1973.

3. Ibid. Smithson, 1973.

4. Ibid. Smithson, 1973.

5. Easterling, Keller. Subtraction. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014.

6. Susskind, Jonah. Detroit: A forested history. In: Havard Design Magazine, N. 45 Into The Woods, Editor: Sigler, Jennifer, Witman-Salkip, Leah, Harvard University Graduate School of Design.

Pp. 86-87 A view of Savannah. 29th of March 1734. Drawing by Peter Gordon. And conceptual collage by the author.

Fig. 1 The mining terril of Waterschei after the demolition of the mine. Trees are planted in order to avoid erosion and fixating the ground. Waterschei 1990 ca.

Fig. 2 Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson. Great Salt Lake, Utah, 1970.





Such developments are affecting today many post-industrial cities at the desperate research for an alternative economic future, between these Genk. The void left by decadence and failure of the modern, industrial system, is in fact quickly filled by investments in search for alternative sources of economic growth. Old and decadent buildings are replaced by renewed structures, while traces of the mining past, and the space left to natural processes are erased. Within these rapid changings that are affecting the city, the access to the so called “wastelands” is quickly erased. Such parts of the city, on the other hand, can potentially represent a space for dialectically engaging with the natural landscape.

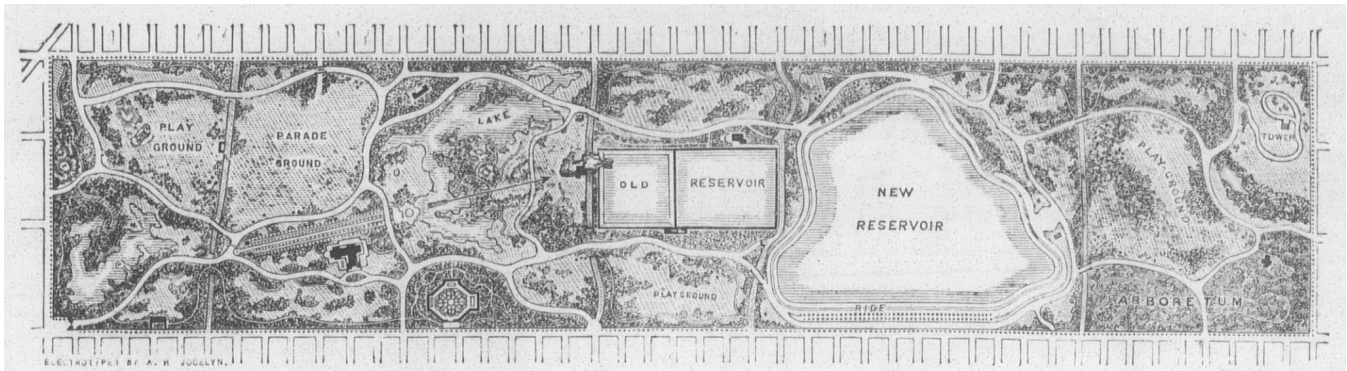
When observing the process of shrinking involved in the transformation of the Garden Cities of Genk looking at the natural landscape becomes relevant again. Where suburbia stops growing, once again the city realize the importance of open, communal urban space<sup>7</sup>. An urban space that is taken over again by a landscape that is not just a conceptualization, but a continuous process of evolution that has to do with the contradiction of human activities. The open spaces in the Garden Cities of Genk, originally planned for providing green recreative space for the workers, is now hosting a variety of ecologies, uses and environments that are formally and informally defined. Architecture, in its ruins and coexistence with an accommodating nature communicate the possibility of a different relationship between Garden and City.

In Genk this is happening, not because of planning regulations over the urban fabric growth, but because of the market’s loss of interest in the area. The progressive abandonment of large employers in the region, the decay of productive activities, opened the way to demolitions and politics of urban shrinking rather than expansion. The natural landscape of the Kempen Plateau is then re-populating those areas that are left empty. Oak Trees, Junipers, Maritime Pines are spreading within a process that is, in many cases, not enhanced by any human activity but the absence of activity itself. The process of ruination of the architecture and the reclaiming of the natural environment lead to reconsider architecture in its very roots. Designing openness and changings rather than a closed, stable object. The processes of re-naturing, re-foresting and the return of the natural landscape within the context of the city implies a series of reflections over the imposition of human ratio on nature and eventually its failure.

7. Marot Sébastien. Sub-Urbanism and the Art of Memory. London: Architectural Association, 2003.

*Fig. 1* The Kaverberg Forest seen from the Waterschei Terril in 2019. Source: Google Earth.

*Fig. 2* Central Park as it was conceived and designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in 1858.





8. Elkin, Rosetta S. The prefixes of forestation. In Havard Design Magazine, N. 45 Into The Woods, Editor: Sigler, Jennifer, Witman-Salkip, Leah, Harvard University Graduate School of Design.

9. Ibid. Elkin

10. Frederick Law Olmsted, The Spoils of the Park. From: Smithson, Robert, Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape, in Artforum, February, 1973.

Fig. 1 The walls surrounding the mining site of Winterslag, Photographed by Jimmy Kets in 2014.

When walking through the Pine forests that surrounds the Garden Cities of Genk, one feels surrounded by the natural realm. However, such forests are the product of a specific human intervention in which the “logic of profit” has played an important role. Pine trees were, in fact, imported in order to make wood available as a raw material to the activities of the mine. In such cases activities of forestation are then again following the modern approach of rationalization for exploitation. Foresters have often, in fact, used their authority to determine value to a natural landscape. This happened by ignoring the less visible attributes of forests themselves such as individual plant behavior and the ecologies to which these are related. This affects the soil and changes the modalities in which biomes are produced.<sup>8</sup> Forestation implicitly implies that the land can assume a certain value as “productive land”. The profit generated by giving value to a certain plot of forested land is based on the idea of “fixity” that nature is supposed to have in that context. Nature becomes again an “object” in itself and the process can be compared to that of the imposition of the miner’s villages over the territory.

As counter-approach to this logic, becomes then necessary an understanding of the natural environment as a continuous flux of relationships, where the designer’s action should be confronted with. Until the natural landscape is not considered as a whole, human intervention will be constantly repeating the mistakes of the past<sup>9</sup>. Considering the elements of the natural landscape not as simple fixed units, but as part of a coherent, evolving whole, opens the way to considerations over the limits of human activity.







LIFE AFTER INDUSTRIAL GROWTH

Discussing about identity with two inhabitants of Waterschei

Germaine Sennesal has been the director of the school in Waterschei for many years. Roger Troch was working in the mine as an engineer. Today are both retired and still are still living in the Cité. I had the opportunity to discuss with them about their daily life, changings in the identity of the town and its inhabitants.

JZ: Now that the mine has closed, what do you think is a reason of pride for Waterchei, the source of its contemporary identity?

R: Work was the element that was keeping society together. The feeling of belonging to the same company and working under the ground was the basis of the way we were relating to each other.

G: After everything stopped many people left, renting the house to new generations of workers. They were mainly Turkish and Moroccan and they were working for the Ford factory in Genk South. Many of the original inhabitants left. They were afraid of these big changings in the Cité social structure. This is probably one of the reason that generated such a high social poverty.

Who didn't left the town, started working somewhere else. Most of them found an employment in other cities, but in order to be able to reach them they needed a car. During the day, they leave with their car for coming back after the working hours. In many families only the male population has an employment, while the rest of the family stay home.

R: The domestic sphere still plays a relevant

role. Relationships with the other inhabitants here are mainly based on the fact of belonging to a certain family. This was the case also when the mine was still open. Life in the Cité was extremely hierarchized. In the church each family, depending on the role within the company was sitting on a different bench. The same thing was happening in the school with classrooms.

G: Women, kids and elderlies still live mainly a domestic life. Everything is happening behind the fences that surrounds our gardens. When I was director of the school we were working to change this situation. We were working until late in the evening to try to involve women and kids in activities. Most of them had difficulties with the language and the kids were receiving education at home. Today the situation has evolved, although the family is still the basis of social life.

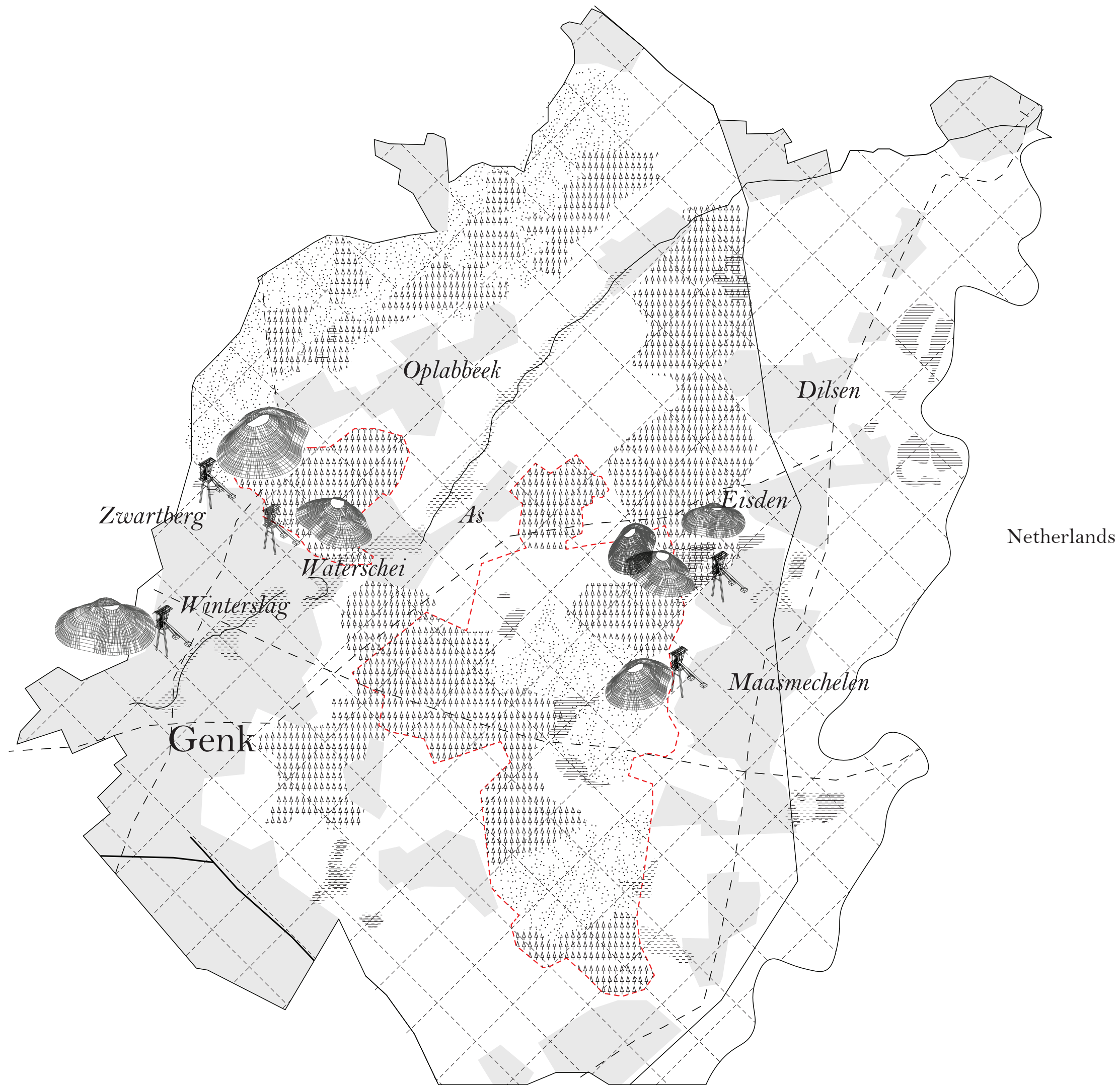
Nowadays only 2% of the inhabitants are Belgian. The rest is Italia, Turkish, Moroccan, Algerian. There is reciprocal respect between communities, however people tend to search for their "similar". There are only few streets which serves as meeting points. Few bars along them and mostly lived by the ex-workers.

G-R: Probably, today the Cité appears as more beautiful than in the past. Now the nature surrounds us and it attracts many tourists as well. The forest is the new "beauty" of this place, for sure more appealing than a coal mine. However, we still feel very nostalgic for the past. The services we were receiving, the feeling of community that we were living...







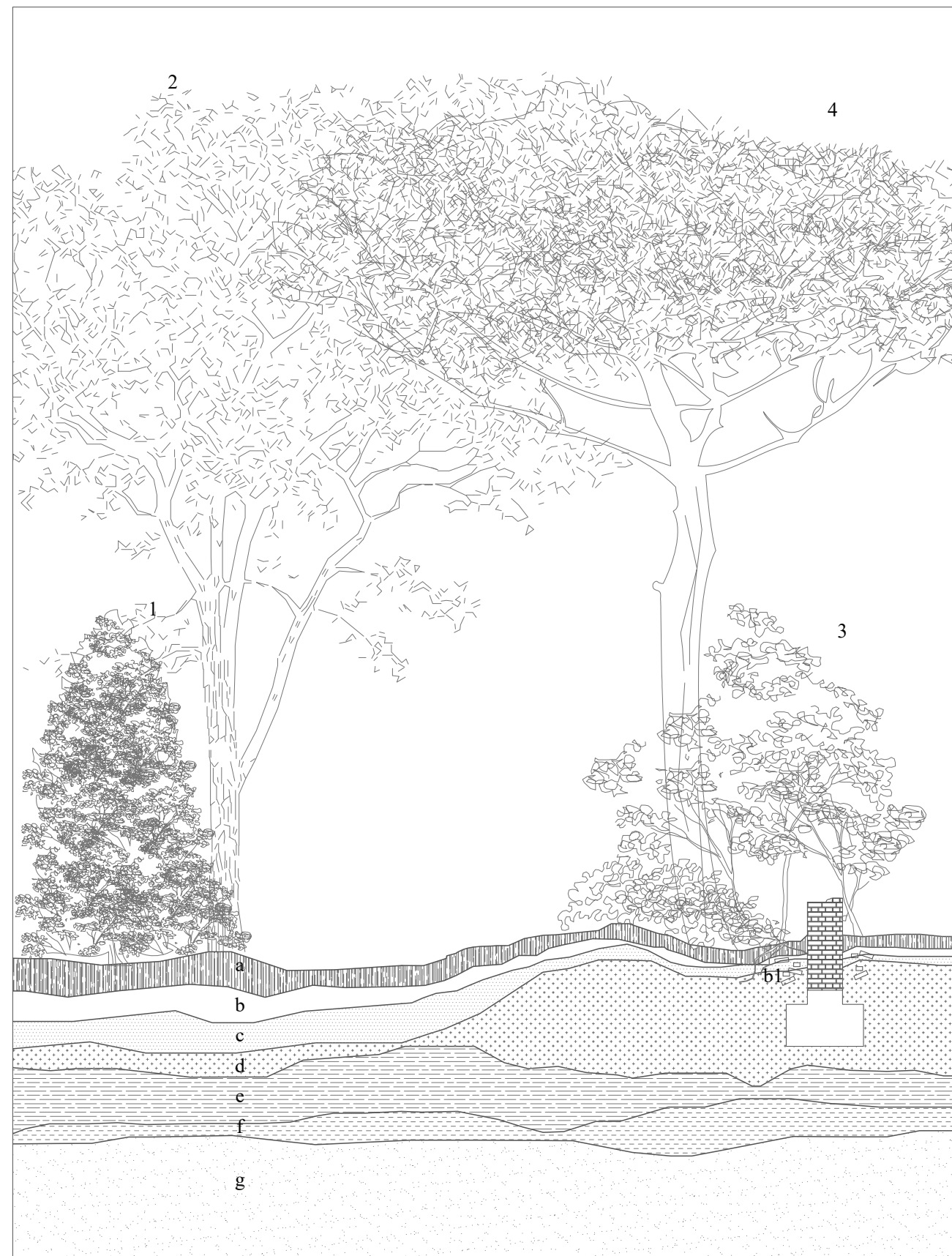




*“The landscape architect André formerly in charge of the suburban plantations of Paris, was walking with me through the Buttes-Chaumont Park, of which he was the designer, when I said of a certain passage of it, “That, to my mind is the best piece of artificial planting of its age, I have ever seen” He smiled and said, “Shall I confess that it is the result of a neglect<sup>10</sup>”.*







1. Juniper (*Juniperus Communis*)
2. Oak Tree (*Quercus Robur*)
3. European Beech (*Fagus Silvatica*)
4. Pine Tree (*Pinus Sabiniana*)

- a. Humus
- b. Small fragments and sand
- b1. Stone and brick fragments
- c. Big fragments and sand
- d. Former phase of accumulation
- e. Accumulated sand phase
- f. Sand
- g.

BRAAKLIGGEND TERREIN  
IN GENK

A talk with Lara Almarcegui on  
Genk, wastelands and politics



Lara Almarcegui is a Spanish artist based in Rotterdam. Her work rotates around the social and political values of wastelands, soil, ruins and abandoned mines. She is author of “Braakliggend terrein in Genk”, realized between 2003 and 2014 in Genk. The work was about preserving a wasteland from further modifications and developments, keeping it as an open ground for plants and activities that are not contemplated in the rest of the city. We had a conversation on the city of Genk and the political value of wastelands.

JZ: How did you became interested in working in Genk?

LA: I have been contacted from the local Artists Residence for realizing a work which would have had a very low budget. At the beginning I was not really interested since when I discovered of the mining past of the city and visited the site. I became immediately attracted by the idea of working there, it is such a fascinating place.

JZ: From where your interest in wastelands come from?

LA: Wastelands are places open to experiment. It is about freedom. The city itself is seeking to re-invent it's possibilities through experimenting. It was really easy for me to get information and permissions. Anyway, the political importance of wastelands is involved in the fact that they differ from other natural spaces such as natural parks. Wastelands are much less respected and interesting to the eyes of people, I believe that

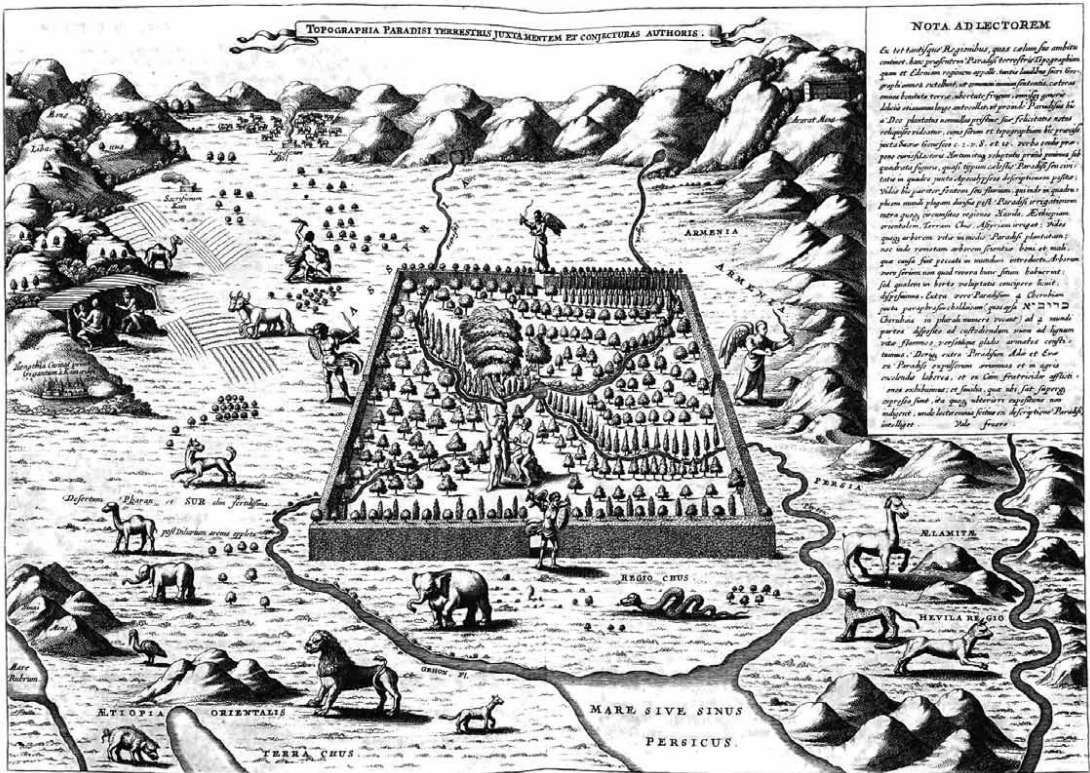
despite their not-being-idyllic appearance they can carry important values. The kind of nature growing there is not the same of a natural park. Plants are invasive and usually not accepted in the preservation of certain natural areas. They have the right to exist anyway, as well as the use people make of them, which are usually not accepted in the plans of urban developments. We need to start thinking that wastelands are not bad for a city, and the values they carry are both spatial and social.

JZ: What about Waterschei? I have been trying to understand what are the elements involved the life of a Garden City. Many people leave and there is not many job opportunities, but still seems like a community is still present.

LA: Waterchei is a fascinating site. It's geological past is also very interesting for its spatial characteristics. People there appreciate the opportunities offered by the landscape. It is about having possibilities. In a place forgotten by planification you can really re-invent yourself and this is what the city is trying to work on.



THE GARDEN AGAINST  
TABULA RASA



The Garden brings together a series of contradictions that refers to its origins as a human product and its enclosing a piece of natural landscape. Gardens have been historically regarded as heavens of quietness and pleasure in a chaotic world. The Garden as element that keeps together the ‘ideal’ and the ‘real’ landscape.<sup>1</sup>

The historical origin of the concept of paradise, rather than its religious derivations, is strongly bounded to the origin of the Garden. Both, in fact, indicates the enclosure and definition of a specific portion of land. The Persian roots of the word is composed of two parts. The term “Pai-ri” which refers to the fact of being “around” and “Daeza” that refers to a “pile or a heap”. The latter terms refers, moreover, to the meaning of “fort or enclosure”. As it directly implies the presence of a wall, such a wall is however used to define rather than defend. It’s a wall that is used to clarify what is inside from what is outside, in other words by dividing and separating it produces space<sup>2</sup>.

One of the most relevant physical representations of the Paradise is that of Athanasius Kircher’s Arca Noë. Here the Paradise is seen as a square-shaped estate enclosing a garden. Such a garden is composed by various trees, animals and irrigation system that are all part of a microcosm where all the resources flows from the outside to the inside. The wall that enclose such a space, can be then seen as a tool to define and control the territory.

The fence that surround the garden, its limit, is shown to the outside territory while replacing the landscape horizon with an internal one. The Garden as an architecture, is strongly bounded to the outside by condensing the characteristics and problematics of the landscape in which is located<sup>3</sup>. We can then conclude that acts as a medium between outside and inside, landscape and architecture, man and lands. It is a precisely defined element that refers to a broader infinite territory.

The paradoxes and potentialities of the Garden becomes then clear when confronted to the urban landscape of the Belgian “Nevelstad”<sup>4</sup>. What role does the landscape plays when situated in the contemporary fragmented urban conditions? It is a context composed by suburbs, shopping malls, business parks and agricultural land, related by infrastructures and separated by wastelands, where the natural landscape can become an ordering entity, enclosed within precise boundaries but affecting the territory “outside”.

1. Aben, Rob, and Saskia de Wit. The Enclosed Garden. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, n.d.

2. XII. Khosravi, Hamed. “The City as a Project I Paradise.” Accessed May 30, 2020. <http://thecityasaproject.org/2011/07/paradise/>.

3. Ibid. Alben, De Wit.

4. For a definition of “Nevelstad” see pp. 6-7.

Pp. 96-97 Elements involved in the ecologies and landscape of the Campine Region. Drawing by the author.

Pp. 96 Earthworks and forest in the outskirts of Waterschei. Photographed by Jimmy Kets in 2014.

Pp. 98 Plants and ground layers in the Campine Region. Drawing by the author.

Fig.1 Topographia Paradisi Terrestrijs, Athanasius Kircher, 1675.







5. Pimlott, Marc. The Public Interior as Idea and Project. Heijningen: Jap Sam Books, 2016.

The Garden however, by defining a finite portion of natural landscape, implicitly imposes itself against the unknown and unknowable, feelings that are embodied in the ancient world’s Arcady. In the Greek world, Arcady was the embodiment of truth and knowledge and the corresponding original animal condition, absence of state and conventions. It was the origin of civilized men’s fears and desires<sup>5</sup>. The Garden constituted an escape from the World, crowded by the ruins of civic society.

As the Garden becomes an element as important as the city itself, the boundaries between “controlled” and “non-controlled” brings the discourse to a level that consider society in its relationship with the landscape. Gardens should not be conceived as fixed entities. A garden evolves, grows and changes. The natural landscape needs nothing else than space and time<sup>7</sup>. The approach



that is often opposed to the modern mentality of exploitation of resources is that of considering human presence as a negative element. However, in an urban and suburban environment this does not make sense<sup>8</sup>. We should read gardens as elements that brings together society and landscape. The aspects of temporality and maintenance are elements that can play a fundamental role in biology as well as architecture. Rather than considering architecture in the traditional sense, of imposing predicted additions, the element of care can stimulate a different relationship between man and nature within the notions of space and place<sup>9</sup>.

The experience of a place as something meaningful is fundamental for the understanding of oneself as part of a particular social and cultural context. A plot, a neighborhood, a city is perceived as a place when landscape and personal narratives are in balance and related to each other. A place is perceived as such when its qualities can be experienced as an articulate ensemble<sup>10</sup>. In this sense the potentialities of gardening becomes relevant when confronted with the declining identity of places such as Genk. The city with the first shopping mall of Belgium<sup>10</sup>, where the concentration of suburban “Farmette” reveal a mentality of individualism and consumption, is also however invested by many activities of gardening that its inhabitants are undertaking on the decayed monuments of a past industrial glory. The activities of gardening, by bringing together man and land, can contribute to the definition of a lost Genius Loci. The expression Genius Loci indicates a prevailing character or atmosphere of a place<sup>12</sup> and has been long used to read the characters of a specific landscape. It is a way to describe the complexity of interactions between society and the territory. Interactions that the process of industrialization and suburbanization tends to dissolve into univocal relationship of exploitation.

The social and political importance of the garden is not only related to its biological values but, more importantly to the activities of maintenance that are able to generate a relationship of care between a community and the land that is inhabited. The care for a certain portion of natural landscape, from the moment in which it do not involves the complete control of its elements, is capable of appreciating the variety of relationships that are part of the Genius Loci of a specific place. The natural landscape changes and evolves over time as well as the relationships between its components. Species interfere with each other<sup>13</sup> and with its gardeners.

6. Pimlott, Marc. The Public Interior as Idea and Project. Heijningen: Jap Sam Books, 2016.

7. Dars, Sophie, Menon, Carlo. Plant en Houtgoed. In: ACCATTONE, N.6 Garden Politics Matter, Editors: Dars, Sophie, Menon, Carlo, in collaboration with Van Daele, Glaad, September 2019.

8. Ibid. Dars, Menon.

9 Ibid. Dars, Menon.

10. Aben, Rob, and Saskia de Wit. The Enclosed Garden. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, n.d.

11. One of the strategies for the development for the city of Genk, after the coal market, was that of tourism by increasing the number of shopping malls and retail space. The first shopping mall of Belgium, named Shopping, opened in Genk in August 1968.

12. Ibid. Aben, De Wit.

13. Ibid. Dars, Menon.

*Fig.1* Allotment Garden next to the abandoned railway track, “Kolenspoor”.  
Source: Google Earth.



14. Aben, Rob, and Saskia de Wit. The Enclosed Garden. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, n.d.

The temporal frame becomes then as important as the spatial one. The design of a garden in a specific location changes and evolves by relating to elements of the wider landscape figure. It keeps together the scale of the landscape and the scale of the detail<sup>14</sup>.

By keeping together the large and the small, the ideal and the real, the natural and the artificial, the archetype of the hortus conclusus becomes a relevant element in the shrinking process of Genk. The hortus conclusus, in its original medieval meaning, was intended as a collection of natural elements, portions of the “outside landscape”, the were framed into an enclosed condition. The hortus conclusus was then articulated in three different forms according to the modalities in which they were used and organized: hortus contemplationis, hortus catalogi, hortus ludi.

The hortus contemplationis refers to the part of garden which is dedicated to reflect the spiritual, harmonius world, being the sublimation of the earthly landscape is meant to be a place for intimate reflection. The hortus catalogi, was the articulation of the garden where plants and animals assume a central position. The natural world “outside” was here rationalized in single elements, in order to study and obtain knowledge over the larger landscape. It was an enumeration of plants and species organized following the “logics of nature”.

The hortus ludi was a stage for life. Activities of dining, dancing, conversing and bathing were taking place in an ideal environment of natural abundance. It is a place of delight and pleasure where sensorial experience is given a relevant role.

These three elements together represent the garden in its qualities. Qualities expressed by the natural landscape conceived by a complex entity that can contribute to society as a space for intimacy, knowledge and as a stage for daily life. The garden becomes then an open air room where the activities of daily life are taking place in a background formed by nature in a limited and readable space.

The garden, as place for a renewed relationship between man and the landscape.

The garden as element where, in the decay of the former industrial town, life can still take place in a form of coexistence with the natural landscape. The social importance of the garden, whether it is a contemporary urban orchard or a medieval Hortus Conclusus is given by its meaning as an attempt to host a form of life, a model, that is usually not (yet) possible outside its walls<sup>15</sup>. The reading of the garden in its social meaning goes far beyond its pragmatic purpose as a provision of foodstuffs.

The garden, still embodying a certain idea of work related to the maintenance, it is not merely defined by the idea of production for profit. It is a place where pleasure overcomes production, care overcome gain and meditation overcome performance. Moreover, in the very activity of designing a garden is implied a certain critique of the architectural practice in itself. The garden cannot be just interpreted as a stable fixed entity, as a traditional building can be, but the time plays a strong role in the process of evolution of the space. Within these terms, the design of a garden is more related to maintenance, rather than the execution itself<sup>16</sup>.

15. Aureli, Pier Vittorio. A Concise History of Gardening. In: ACCATTONE, N.6 Garden Politics Matter, Editors: Dars, Sophie, Menon, Carlo, in collaboration with Van Daele, Glaad, September 2019.

16. Ibid. Aureli.

Fig.1 Garden from *Le Roman De La Rose*. London, British Library.





17. Ibid. Aureli. Pp. 97.

18. Marot Sébastien. Sub-Urbanism and the Art of Memory. London: Architectural Association, 2003.

19. Ibid. Marot.

*Fig. 1* Tourists infrastructure in Genk. Photographed by Jimmy Kets in 2014.

Gardens represent the beginning of domestication of the natural landscape<sup>17</sup>. The design of a garden means questioning the idea of architecture intended as a finished product. The garden is created by the relationships between man and the natural landscape and as such is capable of revealing whether these are relationships of exploitation or coexistence. Architecture find itself in operating in a portion of landscape that has been modified by the univocal imposition of economic law over the processes of nature, by that generating a palimpsest of human interventions over an idealized and objectified idea of nature.

The garden, if shaped by the dialectical process of interactions between gardeners and nature, where nature is an active element, can constitute a model for a renewed relationship with the natural landscape. The interpretation of the humanist concept of “third nature”, John Dixon Hunt describe how the garden was conceived, until the seventeenth century as an art of representation of an “intact”, and consequently active, portion of territory<sup>18</sup>. As an art of representation the garden intrinsically report a value that is related to knowledge. The surrounding territory, through semanticization, is organized in space where the geography of the mind meets the physical one. However, through the development of the “picturesque”, the garden starts to identify with nature as idealization, loosing the condition of material contact and the possibility of actively engaging with it.

A return to the Garden as a collection of readable portions of natural landscape, developed through interactions with “gardeners”, has a series of political consequences. These are juxtaposed to the “clearing” of the landscape implied in the policies of economic transition that the city of Genk is adopting, as many others urban centers in the same situation. To the politics of the tabula rasa in fact, the garden can constitute a place where multiple moments inhabit together, rather than an erasure of a previous condition. The garden has the potential of carving a space within the suburban fabric, where different epochs are virtually present in the same moment<sup>19</sup>. The Garden can be then seen as a strategy for generating an “active palimpsest” where is possible to develop relationships with the landscape and its memory. In this terms it would act as a political agent, counterposed to policies of objectification of nature, by allowing the creation of linkages between landscape and mind.







Where the economic conditions push the region towards new suburban developments and touristic facilities, also influenced by the institution of the Hoge Kempen National Park in 2006, the city develops into a set of not realized and decayed futures. Genk and its Garden Cities can be metaphorically seen as a text without a subject. A place where different temporalities collides and are erased by new positivistic economical hopes. To the production of non-sites, implied in such developments, the Garden as a “third nature” (Marot) can juxtapose a physical vocabulary of the natural landscape, its transformations and memory. A vocabulary where the entire surrounding nature is represented and act as tool for designing, through knowledge, encounters and experimentation, new daily life rituals and a renewed relationship with the landscape.

20. Ibid. Marot. pp. 110.

*Fig.1* Refurbishment and construction works in Winterslag. Photographed by Jimmy Kets in 2014.

*Pp.114-115* Abandoned plot between rowhouses in the proximity of Oud Waterschei. Source: Google Earth.

*Pp. 116* Landscape view over the Hoge Kempen National park. Source: Top Limburg









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