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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE IN SWITZERLAND

The Eternal Construction Site

The Swiss landscape is in a state of upheaval. It is being discovered as a finite and fragile possession. And better still, there is more and more of it. Areas that for decades were filled up indiscriminately with buildings are now being addressed as “landscapes”. **Peter Wullschleger**

The landscapes of Switzerland contribute much to the country's identity and are an expression of its cultural variety. The landscape is an important foundation for people's quality of life, for the country's standing as an economic location, and for tourism. In addition, it is the bearer and the expression of the cultural heritage. The great importance of the Swiss landscape is always coming up against financial interests, however, as well as political limits, and a lack of awareness of its vulnerability and creeping processes of change.

In view of rapid and large-scale developments, such as suburbanization, changes in agriculture and forestry, and reversion to wilderness, there has been a shortage in Switzerland to date of effective strategies of how not only the open countryside but also the built landscape with its urban open spaces might be further developed without detriment to their quality. In future it will no longer be enough to develop landscapes solely through the interventions of various protagonists on the basis of sectional interests. The large-scale organization and shaping of landscape needs to be looked at from a cross-sectional perspective. Quality targets including design criteria must become integral components of all processes that change the landscape both inside and outside built-up areas. An approach to shaping the landscape and open spaces that is both economical of resources and of high quality is not least also a question of our understanding of the concept. Only those who perceive and understand the “landscape” in its natural, ecological, social and economic dimensions can also develop them usefully for people and nature.

Career situation of landscape architects in Switzerland

The remit of landscape architects is expanding constantly. Triggered by an increasing pressure of use and threats from natural perils, new tasks have accrued in the field of housing, city-planning and landscape development, which in turn require the relevant experts. The preservation and further development of the garden and the cultivated landscapes as a cultural heritage are likewise attracting further attention. A guided development with corresponding influence in regional planning, the formulation of landscape visions and the conscious shaping of landscape are becoming ever more important.

Various national research programmes have thematized the shaping of the landscape, both urban and rural, in recent years. They approach the profession of landscape architects with expectations regarding approaches to solutions in regional development and landscape design, but at present the profession finds these expectations very difficult to fulfil.

Training

Switzerland is faced by great challenges in the way it treats the landscape. Landscape is one of the few “natural” resources at the country's disposal. The development of built-up areas, the quality of conurbation landscapes, climate change and natural dangers, structural change in agriculture and the increasing use of the Alps for recreation are just some of the problem areas where trained specialists are needed.

The breadth and complexity of the remit of our profession gave rise as long ago as the 1950s to calls for an expansion and consolidation of training. Until the foundation of the two Swiss Universities of Applied Sciences in Geneva (1970) and Rapperswil (1972), Swiss landscape architects had to go abroad to get their training or else teach themselves. Today both Geneva and Rapperswil offer a three-year bachelor course in landscape architecture. Follow-up master's courses are unfortunately not available, nor is there any academic course on offer. It is true that the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (Federal Institute of Technology, ETH) in Zurich has an Institute of Landscape Architecture with two chairs, but these serve largely to train architects. The institute does offer a one-year extension course (Master of Advanced Studies in Landscape Architecture).

In Switzerland there is an acute shortage of qualified specialists. The cause lies in the dynamics of the professional field of Swiss landscape architecture, on the one hand, and on the other in the small numbers of people being trained each year to bachelor level. In 2007 and 2008, more than 100 new jobs for landscape architects were created each year. The 40 or so graduates of courses in Switzerland can only meet about one-third of demand, and do not fully satisfy the qualifications demanded by the market. By contrast, a good third of the specialists recruited from abroad have a master's degree or equivalent. But even at an international level, the market situation is tense.

Switzerland needs an academic university training for specialists in the field of sustainable development and shaping of the landscape, a training that provides people with the skills to work out feasible solutions to complex future tasks. Without this, Switzerland is gambling away the chance to make up for deficits in research, to formulate well-founded visions in respect of the landscape, to exploit (location) potentials, and to design and implement innovative solutions for the landscape of tomorrow with competent specialists.

A professional association for landscape architects

In order to make sure the concerns of the professional body are listened to by politicians and society at large, energies must be concentrated. Difficult times and emergencies are often the driving force of intense cooperation, and one such emergency evidently occurred in 1925. Competition among garden designers, who as a rule were at the same time proprietors of garden-design businesses, became ever more expensive and was taking on grotesque forms. Thus it was nothing out of the ordinary for competing firms to have their projects (which had been drawn up for free in any case) effectively presented by artists. The expenditure on the unpaid-for design phase, plus the increasing complexity of the task, went up and up, and even threatened to ruin the best-placed businesses. These conditions moved some designers to make contact with their fellows in order to guide the rivalry along rational paths.

Already in the 1930s, the increasing use of land added new tasks to the "classical" repertoire of garden landscapers, namely landscape management and landscape design. In 1938, in a paper delivered to an international congress on garden design in Hanover, Walter Mertens pointed to the extended remit of garden landscapers. In the same vein, since 1938 there had been a landscape architecture committee in the Bund Schweizerischer Gartengestalter (Federation of Swiss Garden Designers, BSG), which, even before the foundation of the Schweizerische Vereinigung für Landesplanung (Swiss Planning Association) in 1943, drew up a catalogue of tasks for those involved in landscape management and landscape design. Thus the change of name from BSG to "Bund Schweizer Garten- und Landschaftsarchitekten" (Federation of Swiss Garden and Landscape Architects) in 1958 was an obvious step to take. In 1987 the "Garden" element in the name was dropped entirely. This did not solve the problem, which persists to this day, of the professional designation, which is still a source of confusion. Architects in particular fear that they will suffocate if they have to "share" their professional designation. They therefore continue to prefer the terms "garden designers" and "landscape planners".

Communication

Heiri Matthys, editor of anthos for many years, wrote in his Festschrift to mark the golden jubilee of the BSG in 1975: "An association which is incapable of presenting its achievements or formulating its concerns is sterile or dead." In today's information society, this sentence is even truer than it was then. As a result, today's Federation of Swiss Landscape Architects (BSLA) directs its attention not only to the training of its members and the quality of their services, but also, and above all, to communication. It tries, with the use of a whole variety of means, to keep landscape architecture in the public eye, and to promote landscape architects as competent partners in the implementation of current social tasks. This communication includes the publication of the specialist journal anthos, the biennial Handbuch Schweizer Landschaftsarchitektur (Manual of Swiss Landscape Architecture), an extensive and up-to-date internet presence, the landscape architecture guide to Switzerland,

which appeared in 2002, and also the staging of expert congresses such as the annual Rapperswiler-Tag and the encouragement of young professionals through the Evariste Mertens Prize, which is organized with a partner town or city, likewise every two years. Of course a landscape architecture world congress is also one of these communication tasks. It provides an outstanding shop-window and guarantees increased media interest well beyond the confines of the field.

Cultural heritage

The Stiftung Schweizer Landschaftsarchitektur (Swiss Landscape Architecture Foundation, SLA) was set up on the initiative of the BSLA and the Hochschule für Technik Rapperswil (Technical University Rapperswil, HSR) (formerly known as the Interkantonaales Technikum Rapperswil ITR). It promotes high-quality development of open spaces and landscapes in Switzerland by preserving historical sources and supporting the department of landscape architecture at the HSR. The university's Institute for the History and Theory of Landscape Architecture forms a bridge between past, present and future.

With the aim of collecting, conserving and researching sources and documents relating to garden and landscape architecture in Switzerland, the Foundation set up the Archive for Swiss Landscape Architecture (ASLA) in 1982. As a documentation, information and research centre, it seeks to extend and disseminate general and specific knowledge of garden and landscape architecture. The archive collects material from the estates of landscape architects, as well as from editors and writers working on journals in the field, from teachers at schools of garden design and landscape architecture, and other people involved in the field, who have lived and worked in Switzerland. It now comprises some 45 000 plans, 30 000 slides, negatives and photographic prints, 6000 postcards, 3500 books and numerous manuscripts, models, magazines, audio tapes and videos. It represents a unique memory of our profession, which (what else?) suffers from a chronic shortage of funds.

Golden age

The positive development and the growing need for landscape architects in Switzerland find their expression in an increasing number of members of the professional association, which is pleasing in itself, as this also shows that even after 86 years, it still makes sense to approach great tasks together. But the success has a somewhat bitter aftertaste. The situation is like that of the medical profession: increasing density of supply can also be interpreted as revealing a decline in the nation's health.

The patient, that is to say, the landscape, is not yet in the intensive care unit, but worries about atrophy and injuries are leading to increased need for nursing. If the clinic we call landscape architecture is joined by a well-equipped and effective maternity unit, we can approach the future with confidence.



BSLA picture concept: the searching individual between the ideal and the real environments - landscape architects are the professional intermediaries between these two worlds.