

**Zeitschrift:** Pamphlet  
**Herausgeber:** Professur für Landschaftsarchitektur, Christophe Girot, ETH Zürich  
**Band:** - (2012)  
**Heft:** 15

**Artikel:** Topologie = Topology  
**Autor:** Girot, Christophe / Freytag, Anette / Kirchengast, Albert / Krizenecky, Suzanne / Richter, Dunja  
**Kapitel:** Reflexions  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-984650>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 14.03.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## REFLEXIONS

**For humans, nature is always a matter of culture.** Landscape is an existential expression of humans; it is evidence of changing cultural techniques and design practices.

If nature is not independent of us, then we have to become more aware of it. We are responsible for it. Our environment necessitates topological order – the course of a river, a road, a front garden. The designed integration of diverse requirements is at issue, and must be carefully considered.

Topological thinking must recognise needs and lead to forms. But which forms? Those that allow for “ideas”.

**Topological thinking is rooted in local issues. It resists the gestures of technical thinking and instead respects local values – the soil, the plants, the weather, and the local customs. Peoples’ well-being is its objective.**

Landscape today would mean entering the topological space of possibilities and designing the following in an integrated fashion: agriculture, forestry, fisheries and industry, trade, transport, living and sport, leisure, recreation and: nature. A factory smokestack next to a flower bed, work next to pleasure. This can’t be done in an impetuous way, however, as too much is taking place; design is a prerequisite.

—

Nowadays we experience nature without culture. It is simultaneously an object of hatred and one of desire. In remembrance of a long tradition of forming nature, it is important that we develop a topological order that is appropriate to current complexity and that builds on existing identities. We identify historically evolved topological space as one which has relationships that were created through cultural inter-

ventions made since settlement and cultivation originally began. In such a space nature remains alive in the symbolic form of our culture.

We persistently live at odds with ourselves: We are ordinary consumers, environmentalists, and long-distance travellers alike; we donate money and become outraged, and yet we can't even figure out the simplest of interrelationships. This is what remains of lay persons as experts in this emancipated age of information: To know what we are eating because it's written on the package; to encounter a cow like Tarkovsky's *Stalker* encounters rain in the Zone.

We should know where an apple comes from, where the water that we wash it with comes from, and where it flows afterwards. Responsibility is not been taken away from us, even if we have relinquished a great many things.

“When progressive domination over nature becomes an end to itself, then we fall back into a purely natural process. Only the remembering of nature as a standard of conduct makes it possible to get beyond nature.” said Robert Spaemann.

**Topological aspects are indeed infiltrating the technical:** The society of experts is still a society of lay persons; everyone's workday ends at some point, and then they go outdoors. The form our environment should take must not be decided by a weary worker at a drawing board on the 20th floor. Pick up a handful of soil and get your hands dirty instead of looking at a master plan. But these are actually just metaphors; it's really about getting involved. Humans are what count, and not enforcement agencies.

«Beauty is, admittedly, the work of free contemplation, and with it we do enter upon the world of ideas. Beauty, then, is indeed an object for

us, because reflection is the condition of our having any sensation of it; but it is at the same time a state of the perceiving subject, because feeling is a condition of our having any perception of it. Thus beauty is indeed form, because we contemplate it; but it is at the same time life, because we feel it. In a word: it is at once a state of our being and an activity we perform.» said Schiller.

**Topologists are interested in a concept of humanity that recognises humans as spiritual beings in addition to being merely physical.**

—

«Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays.» said Schiller.

Design that is universal and as self-evident as the joy of a child's game brings us closer to the experience of natural beauty. Children remind us to think and to plan in terms of generations as opposed to mere legislative periods.

Things are sustainable if they last. Something that lasts is the result of an examination and a discussion of things, which is, in the end, creating new forms from existing ones.

The alternative to an affirmation of economic constraints is to open a discussion about that which is possible. This should be based on a social resolution: To show strength by not always doing what might be in one's power.

**Topology subordinates the interests of individual disciplines to the design of space.** The whole, as we all know, is more than the sum of its parts.

Perhaps we find pre-industrial cultural landscapes so beautiful because everything appears to have its place, because they follow an existential logic of creation. When viewed *ex post*, admittedly. There is no doubt that we have extracted everything we need from them. And yet, the idea of order remains. Designing means having an “idea”. Form means that careful consideration is required.

With regard to the fascination a territory’s palimpsest character may have: That which was once structured appears to have lost the character of having been made.

“What in artworks is structured, gapless, resting in itself, is an after-image of the silence that is the single medium through which nature speaks.” said Adorno.

Painting and poetry were particularly important for the development of the landscape because they provided a double synthetic function. They made things perceptible and revealed the relationships between elements. Landscapes were thus organised through these descriptions and the experiencing of them ensured. Topologists, however, organise space.

Even Humboldt realised that his shipload of new items, i.e. plants, animals, and rocks, from the Americas would not be understandable if they were not made appreciable through the use of “images”. And thus he made phenotypes – *avant la lettre*.

Movement and activity predominated in the “images” created by painters and poets: The shepherd’s shadow refers to death, as even in Arcadia death was present. Landscape was always a place of conflict. There were gods who fell from the heavens, people who fled, and even snakes with which they wrestled. Landscape was a pictorial communiqué of understanding – an entirety. And the message is: Fight on! Organising is itself an aesthetic quality.

That images of a life well-lived or favourable environs are interchangeable is a capitulation to the facts. Who could mistake the mood found between streets on a summer evening with decay? The task is to use this to mould and shape something.

It's not about a misunderstanding of the aesthetic being merely an embellishment, as nature is existential. The fact that it has been created does not get to the heart of the matter.

—

Legislature-dependent belief in a system and quantitative reasoning do indeed generate their own “images”, namely anesthetic ones. Their form is reactively derived from what is already present, and theoretically legitimises itself from what is near at hand – issues which have presently been elevated to magical formulas: economics and energy.

We need political faith in design; gimmickry is not enough. Motorway landscapes are not pleasurable places to spend time, and bridges cannot replace homes.

“Organic”, “fair”, “sustainable”. And what will this world look like?

Many problems are those of spatial localisation. **Topology is the study of the appropriate order created through an experiencing of beauty.** It is a proportional correlation to that which is of obvious value to us.

**Landscape architecture is the most fundamental of design fields, as it maintains the beauty of nature at its core.** It is a partner to many other disciplines within the topological space; disciplines such as geology, hydrology, forestry, agriculture, environmental technology, ecology, economics, regional planning, transport planning, engineering, and architecture, among others.

Landscape architects understand our inclination to desire certain things from nature, desires that can be referred to as supra-individual. Where, after all, do we enjoy relaxing the most?

“In order to get clear about aesthetic words you have to describe ways of living.” said Wittgenstein.

Environmental protection campaigns and tourism advertising have entered into sinister alliances with one another: They make us believe we are always in the wrong place, that we are victims of unbearable deficiencies that can only be compensated for by “another place”. Topologists, on the other hand, believe that the places we already inhabit, the here and now, are what is important. We have to design these places so that it is no longer necessary to escape.

—

At present the term landscape is problematic: It was first rejected, but then not replaced with anything better, so that it functioned as a stop-gap. “Landscape” as a magic word, a weapon, a temporary fix. But when everything becomes “landscape”, nothing remains.

**Landscape is not an in-between.** Rural and urban are valid terms in topological space – there is no need to quibble about this. Cities, in landscape terms, should be treated as dense elements. They have boundaries so that they take on a particular form.

Topological reorganisation ends the battle of the four natures. None of them wins. They appear together. Topology creates relationships while valuing the simultaneousness of the distinguishable: Primeval forest next to cultivated fields next to industry.

Furthermore, we should say that we also want the *locus amoenus*, the pleasant place, and that this will have consequences because a lack of beauty, i.e. ugliness, also exists. There have to be boundaries, as well as someone who remembers and advocates them. Ugliness? Why not? The fact that ugliness exists is a good benchmark, but it means that a sense of difference must exist.

In topological space the landscape is both preserved and revoked; large and small, political, cultural, and natural structures are rearranged.

—

**This is based on a concept of nature that has a symbolic quality.** Growth and withering both draw the attention of humans to their own physis and to the physical qualities surrounding them, increasing their aesthetic experience. And yet, not everything can be admired; things don't grow and thrive everywhere. In some countries signs say "Not for drinking!" on the wells. And there are others. This moves us. These are the tasks at hand.

**Plants carry the sense of vitality.** Today, ecology and the doctrine of energy are assigned particular images: wilderness, tall grass, numerous frogs, or a solar park. Plant selection should be determined by a particular site with its specific characteristics and a wish for diversity; not by polemic debates.

Working with plants is working with the future. Thinking along the lines of growth is knowledge that helps ensure growth will continue. A person who plants a tree is not relieved of his or her responsibility once the planting hole is filled with soil.

"Nothing thrives without care; and the most splendid objects lose their worth through inappropriate treatment." said Lenné.



Design that uses local materials, as opposed to a global green aesthetic, promises continuity and sensibility with regards to a particular site. Respect and understanding are the results of an intensive examination of, and debate about, this issue.

Topography has determined trading routes and the founding of cities – natural structure still indicates how design should be carried out. The green edge of a stream (or the lack of one), a clear view into the distance (or the necessity of preventing views), the scent of a place, the sound of the birds that live there, and the human traces that accompany it all.

Topology reads the entire space as an arrangement of traces and searches everywhere for structures: Designing topologically does not mean that new elements are always implemented, but rather that there is a mediation between that which exists, a proven knowledge of design, and a role for wishes that humans have.

**Each individual topological achievement must draw on the design traditions for landscapes and gardens** – conventions and archetypes that always last longer than any break with them.

—

Topologists work locally. And although they often create places of refuge, these places aren't of an escapist nature. They are instead related to other areas within the topological space.

What knowledge have we not already acquired, through great effort, and then used to create a composition? That it doesn't disturb us to persist and to optimise where necessary is disturbing in itself. Don't we have enough to do with the things that are already familiar to us?

The tools that evolve alongside landscape architectural design are now more complex than mere spades. Topologists use all available tools to understand the complex topography of a place and to review the design process: from a pencil to a terrestrial laser scanner, from vegetation mapping to the flight of a drone, and from sand models to CNC models. Analysing, designing, and visualising: Understanding precedes designing. And reaching an understanding of existing conditions requires a reflexive and critical use of tools – which presupposes the use of an open and forthright methodology

The goal is to introduce the daring security of τέχνη in favour of the ποιήσις. Without the canon of the “righteous” any reflection about this is self-imposed. It is really a matter of transporting the poetic into the intervention with the space.

“Scientific representation is never able to encompass the coming to presence of nature; for the objectness of nature is, only one way in which nature exhibits itself. The inconspicuous state of affairs conceals itself in the science. But it does not lie in them as an apple lies in a basket. Rather we must say: The sciences, for their part, lie in the inconspicuous state of affairs as the river lies in its source. As over against this, reflection first brings us onto the way toward the place of our sojourning.” said Martin Heidegger.

The topological discussion does not produce ready-made solutions. Such a discussion is held with a willingness to review and to jointly expand upon one’s positions. When designing a wind park, for example.

The first thing topologists have to learn is not to fool average consumers about aesthetics. Topological space must generate an everyday environment for users instead of major hierarchies. Users undergoing an aesthetic experience.

What is the mood in the streets? What can we do to make things peaceful? What can trees contribute to this, and especially our buildings? **Learning about what is essential in design means that the way beauty is made apparent in everyday life must be introduced into topologists' discourse.**

—

When the “ha-ha” moment occurs upon passing the garden fence, the extent of scale becomes apparent. What else is landscape architecture? Even Lenné and Pückler were master planners. They creatively merged gardens, parks, forests, avenues, open fields, villages, and cities into a whole.

Many things have to fit into a topologically organised space. But where are the phenomenal-sensual aspects in the current process of making structural-spatial decisions? What do diagrams and the labelling of plans reveal about particulate matter in the air, the uniqueness of a certain area, or a person's desire for peace and quiet?

Topology is in fact the science of place. But a place has no genius that wasn't given to it. And genii are shy. Abstraction does not describe their fundamental nature. The topological understanding of nature is an aesthetic one, and this provides us with a task. The phenomena around us, deceptively free of charge, serve as the foundation of topology: well-being as an indicator, the general mood as opposed to a whim, the things we have in common – the transformation of sensory perception into the perception of a sense. That which we design must be in relation to the things we hope for.

The reorganisation of space has already begun – but not as a product of design. We need a social contract, as we can't draw one up with nature.

Topologists ask questions about the future and the present that are based on the knowledge of the ancient discipline used to shape the landscape. They even go as far as questioning their discipline's current doctrine in order to assign it a new place within the topological framework. The fresh dialogue between disciplines is based on understanding, the *topoi* of the discussion. In self-evidence, however, there is beauty, because nothing is actually self-evident.

**In the end the desired order loses its character of being something that has been constructed – if the individual lives within it.**

