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DESIGNING AS ACCUMULATION

Philipp Urech

The intellectual exercise of designing is steeped in a certain worldview. Designing implies a prospective and intentional undertaking of imagination that goes beyond the unplanned transformations and events that have given shape to many cities and landscapes. In stating the agency of designing in this way, a series of questions arises to torment those who are committed to this vocation. Is designing entirely an intellectual process of creation? Or can it be an intuitive and more bodily experience? Is it to draw, or to build a model? Is it the moment when an idea comes to mind? Or is it the moment when the idea is finally articulated within its context? Is designing about making the right decisions? What is the role of the designer? Can a design evolve from a collective process? Or could designing be the process itself? If designing answers the needs of people, what do we need to know about them? Can a designer ever operate in an unfamiliar place? Should a designer ever operate in an unfamiliar place? What vocabulary is needed to address all the intricacies of a site? If the perception of the site

is limited, what should the designer be concerned with? Is any abstraction of the site justified? Is designing about the author, the site or the tool? Is it a stalemate between all three, or should it rather be an equally balanced compromise? Since the site is changing, what is the time horizon that should be considered? What are the cycles that affect the site? How do tools change the ways of designing? Does designing result in an artifact? Or does designing mean devising a course of action to achieve something that has only been imagined?

In my understanding, designing is a deliberate organization of the physical space that not only responds to current context and activities but is also subject to (r)evolving regimes, such as the social, historical, economic, energetic, or symbolic dimensions of a place. Indeed, the number of tangible and intangible dynamics intertwined in the material space is so great that it would be futile to catalog them all in their entirety. Yet their activity marks the place with traits that physically aggregate, whether minute or substantial. Designing places therefore means to cement some of these traits on the landscape surface, and to supersede others. The traits contribute to the continuum of societal collaboration where human activities materialize into an ensemble of distinctive character and atmosphere, a collective product of civilization. For this reason, places may be seen as the counterpart of their dwellers—the former being shaped by the aspirations of the latter, and the latter being

encompassed by the physical reality of the former.

Within my practice at the Chair of Landscape Architecture of Christophe Girot, we have studied rising rivers around Dutch polders, sinking Indonesian kampongs, flash floods in the Sonoran Desert, tides in the Venetian lagoon, urban breezeways in Singapore, and the alternating drought and inundation of agrarian plains in Madagascar. Although all these places deal with the water cycle, the specific case studies could not be more different from one another. This awareness led us to explore a design method that could be specific to every place, yet universal in application. We know that small topographic changes impact flow patterns on kilometer-wide scales. We know that minute differences of temperature have severe consequences on large-scale water cycles. The steep accumulation of minute human-made transformations has profoundly altered the ecological balance in which we partake. Such issues require working with a highly accurate recording of a physical landscape made of materials and driving forces. The method

legitimizes taking on the complex challenge of designing a landscape through highly targeted and selective transformations.

The case studies provided insight into how the act of designing takes hold when it yields to the process of accumulation, in the same way human activity invariably asserts itself on the landscape: that is, by intelligently shaping the ground to secure its subsistence, from food to energy, from defense to mobility. Topography is where shapes of all ages accumulate. The act of designing persists when it harmonizes with the quality inherent to a place. This quality is the topology of a place. It resonates where an accumulation of events has settled in. The landscape of Venice, Jakarta, Antananarivo, or that of any city molded by human activity and life, is permeated by this quality. In a way, the topological approach of designing places might bring an answer to the ardent quest for the “quality without a name.”¹ Places that people are attracted to are those where this quality comes into play and keeps the designed form alive.

1 Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).