Hyper-landscapes. Editorial

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Editorial Hyper-landscapes

In times of hyper-connectivity, virtual realities, and visual sophistication, landscapes must be powerful. Either designed or represented, a landscape, or a landscape architecture project, must be powerful in terms of its aesthetics, its evocative ability, environmental performance, and function. In some cases, it must compete with reality and offer an even better nature than the real one. It must be multi-faceted and highly performative—a super-landscape, or a hyper-landscape.

Three main approaches to a super-landscape emerge from current landscape design practice and theoretical discourse, as well as—directly or indirectly—from some of the articles and reviews presented in this issue of JoLA.

The first approach conceptualizes a super-landscape as the re-creation of natural processes to design environmentally sustainable landscapes. Michael Van Valkenburgh originally used the term hyper-nature to characterize his own approach to landscape design, which he saw as a constructed 'exaggerated version of a natural palette' (*Amidon 2005: 57*) and 'a landscape of optimal ecological function at the point of scalar compression' (*MVVA*). Later, the concept of hyper-nature was retrieved by Elisabeth Meyer in her seminal manifesto 'Sustaining Beauty'. She noted that hyper-nature depends on a series of design tactics including exaggeration, distillation, and juxtaposition (*Meyer 2008: 17–18*). The term is re-examined by Katherine E. Bennett in her analysis of agency and materiality in contemporary landscape architectural practice presented in this issue. The super-landscape as the artificial, and more performative, re-creation of nature has recently emerged as an innovative design approach to climate change, at least in the short-term, as shown by Carey Clouse in her analysis of artificial glaciers in the Himalaya. While in Australia, as Julian Bolleter demonstrates, the re-naturalization of urban voids is a proposed design strategy to tackle fragmented suburban growth and to revitalize open spaces of no particular quality. The super-landscape, in this specific case, becomes a dense 'natural' landscape capable of insinuating itself into existing urban fabric and giving a new organization to the city.

A second super-landscape engages human imagination by evoking an image of nature or a constituent element of a landscape. With its emphasis on the visual, such a landscape can also become iconic. One of the most recent examples of this type of super-landscape is the artificial grove of 'Supertrees' designed by Grant Associates in Gardens by the Bay—Bay South, in Singapore. Explicit celebrations of Singapore's tropical landscape, the 'Supertrees' are enhanced images of the rainforest and its essential vegetative structure. At the same time, they contain the environmental engines that fuel the park (*Rinaldi 2012: 100–101*). However, as the work of Piet Oudolf—whose drawings are the subject of one of the Thinking Eye pieces—shows, a concern for landscape performance, atmosphere, and temporality can equally be demonstrated through planting designs that abstract and augment qualities of naturally occurring meadows.

A third super-landscape is the virtual landscape, the product of more and more sophisticated methods of digital visualization (*Turner 2001*). While Jillian Walliss, Heike Rahmann, Jorg Sieweke, and Zaneta Hong discuss the potential role of digital technologies in a deeper perception of the fundamentals of landscape architecture, Karl Kullmann addresses the contemporary shift towards an extreme realism in the visualization of landscape and urban design projects, and the powerful effect on landscape design communication. He notes, however, that there are six significant limitations, including perception, interpretation, and education, that prevent hyper-realism in landscape design visualisation from becoming an accurate descriptor of a landscape and/or a landscape practice. If hyper-realism, in its exaggeration in comparison to reality, is deceptive in its representation of a landscape—or of a landscape architecture project—the ubiquity of digital tools can equally present opportunities for documenting immediate experiential qualities of the site, as shown in the Thinking Eye by Phoebe Lickwar and Katya Crawford.

The super-landscape is then nature perfected, augmented through technology and design, or visualization techniques. Such an approach can be compared to what Kathryn Gustafson calls the 'contemporary picturesque': a design method that has nature—and urban ecology—as the main program. Its aim is to design landscapes that are both aesthetically beautiful and also functional as they mirror, reinforce, or recreate natural processes. But what was the eighteenth century picturesque garden if not an artificial re-creation of natural form? When the picturesque garden style was developed and spread across Europe, its design was, obviously, neither inspired by environmental concerns nor by sustainability. However, it aimed at augmenting the intrinsic (aesthetic) qualities of the natural landscape; it was, at least in part, a prelude to contemporary super-landscapes.

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