

The Ground Beneath Our Feet

Were I less fragile, I'd be a skateboarder!



Where are we? We might be in a desert, sand blown by wind, shaped into known and unknown geometries. We might be in that inverted forest, a riposte to T S Eliot's Waste Land. The eye can pause in one of those concave refuges that wind offers, the desert we rarely experience. Or then we drift, a welcome illusion where the crest of a small mount is lopped off and the ground beneath our feet senses undulations of the tide. We register the perfect slice, a novel tectonic and precise cut, made by the contoured lines and forces that tempt no hierarchy. A beauty like sand dunes can still that moment for as long as we like. Mechanical and geometric precision coming from the most unusual sources – broken glass or the timeless waves - suggest not the banality of mini golf but urban mountaineering in strenuous miniature. Only much gentler.



It is quite possible we write about a piece of land, a plot, an urban square (which is never quite a square), a plaza, a piazza or a *platz*, in ways that test our intuition. We sense the consistency of material and energy, these slow combustions that make up fresh expressions. We call it an *interface* and we still naturally think to other writing, though for how long we do not know, so rapidly does writing dissolve today. We see other diagrams of someone else's mind, even the 'novel tectonics' of Reiser and Umemoto. And all this can remain so cruelly unreadable until we find a place that begins to make sense, that we imagine belongs to us, all of us. These tectonics, always a part of architecture's authentic jargon that we fall back on make up the matter and energy that leads from, and makes up, actions which need no further communication. We feel, sense and register! This is a material practice which, according to Reiser and Umemoto, is "the shift from asking, *what does this mean?* to *what does this do?*"



Where should we start? Sitting, walking, smoking, vaping; ambling with less intent, or moving with more intent, a firm haste? Or skateboarding? This surface under our feet undulates ever so slightly, slopes indiscernibly around the large columned monument to those killed saving Austria. In this platz-with-memory, Austria seems both under-feet in the earth, in the inverted forest and above, where the eagle is framed by mountain and sky. This makes for convincing but possibly redundant photography. The image less militant until that is, we understand the shifts in time and history such monuments have gone through.



If I lived in Innsbruck, I would probably use this space regularly. If I had less fragility, I would learn to skateboard. Who dares, designs! Any part of this landscape may take eye and body into involuntary stillness. The space around us, surrounded by a diagram of rock, surprises. Is this a *Noguchi* in the city, and a *de Chirico* in the later afternoon shadows? Or is it sea-salt with an aperitif? Reminding us how much diagrams always need that exit, in the afternoon past three o'clock the kids were out. A pair navigating the small inclines, kickflipping imaginary miniature rip curls in the textured concrete. Time and again the feet stall and the board is let go, running down on its own. When successful, the jubilant skateboarders perch with their boards stretched along the upper edge of the concrete. There must be a term or special code for this position. They hold their achievement. Kings of their small smooth castle, astride, momentary statues. Then down.



We might also be in search of a coffee, an aperitif or digestif. We think to the spritz of dubious providence. Some will sit in the edge café with or without memory watching small children do what they do, run almost naked and take the water in the jets near the landhaus. Unperturbed by eagle and monument, no screams just pure delight, kids called Wolf, Reiner, Suzi or Bennie. Shaded by four in the afternoon, the sun continues a shadow play through trees, whilst the re-skinned large black glass building frames, reflects and delicately distorts lines of mountain and eagle. After five or six o'clock the serious skaters, mountain bikers arrive, the BMXers; it's their playground. A persistent and consistent playground, not like a blank slate but as far away from those playground structures of controlled urban planning.



Some city spaces can accelerate, inviting public exit immediately on arrival. The exit is espied and destination practical and punctual. Others might be taking a pause from moving from one side of the 'platz' to the other, going from or towards the old town in Innsbruck. Other city spaces hold us back, ask for the idle moment, invite a turn, a pause. This is the wait where waiting is not always planned. This is the idling that allows us to breathe. In all cities, these urban moments are public invitations. They are channelled, directed through to the feet. For the feet recognise the pause. The 'platz' needs no memory then, it becomes the immediate. A clearing of space, light slanted through a dense forest. Just as a shadow bends to marry a deformed contour.



When is terra, *firma*? When is the ground, 'grounded'? A *terra firma* forest is moist, tropical, one open to the seasonal flood that now encroaches. *Terra firma* also describes the mainland territories of the Republic of Venice. But *terra firma* is a rock group, a *farscape* and *nearscape*; a private equity firm and countless landscape companies. Disambiguation is something we must take seriously, and not because Wikipedia tells us so. Versatile and contextual we wish also for our mediations on the earth to be represented in other ways. Is not all that we consider a landscape, complex and dynamic, an unrevealed geometry waiting for novelty? And if so, do we seek the relational rules that guide - that ground us - realising the word *ground* is our very flexibility and existence. *Terra Firma* is also a brand of skateboard!



Terraforming, a term creeping into selected vocabularies in architecture and probably just as likely to disappear, has long been misunderstood. Coined by Jack Williamson in *Collision Orbit* (1942) it is this gentle science we see acted out in Innsbruck. Known as "earth-shaping" it is probably one of those actions we wish to have more than hypothetical content. Instead of deliberately modifying the atmosphere, temperature, surface topography or ecology of a planet, moon, or any other body that milks our energy, we consider smaller environments and wish to make them more habitable to dwell in. Every building alters the atmosphere, and not always to the good. Every landform can relieve it or ignore it. Architecture may have to become less about building and more about altering atmospheres. The deliberate modification of the contours of this city site invite new atmospheres; a small ecology of the horizon acting out in wind, climate and surface to become another anatomy. Accessibility and the layout of paths – machine patterns - result from the modulation of the surface. Spatial constraints, functional requirements offer a modelling glee and morphological precision. Becoming an imaginary space beyond its function, we still speak of urban planning for some reason.



A competition for a Students Union sited in the forest outside Helsinki was held in 1961. The land was solid, the outcrop exaggerated with firm geological layers that went down, down to that inverted forest. The tall trees were hardly a clearing but if you were reading Heidegger at the time, they could represent one. A young architect walked the site. Movements up and movements down suggested form and a diagram as rock began to function as roof and form. There was no trick about it. Successful action meant not to be seduced by the shadows and the light emerging through the trees. The architect would always say later he used his feet as sensors to measure the ground beneath, the slight incline, drag, concavity and depression. Changes were acute and subtle, geometry becoming space. A series of interlinked inverted caves became the well-known building Dipoli. Tempting myth to emerge, this was not merely a touching and misunderstood phenomenology, it was ‘morphology’ where a precise geometry transformed an existing environment into a ‘constructed landscape’. “The era in which we live,” Kwinter writes in *The Judo of Cold Compulsion* “can be characterised as one in which knowledge is increasingly devised from the structure of flow... (a) new materialism may well be a new expressionism.” Contours and rates of change in data, patterns of material action. It was this new expressionism that emerged six decades ago to the young architect, Rema Pietilä.



We can speak of a terrain, a morphological act when form and structure of surface become part of the architectural eye. *The ground beneath our feet* became this Innsbruck project. Using digital modelling, always firing up the diagram in a private language until it gave precision offered the architects those design exits required to become space. One can see an imagined roofscape, an earth that needs shaped uplift and depression. These were wired frames of site and space, new contours precisely planned, seen acutely on an aerial photograph. The cut, the contour, the shaping is applied by external and internal sensory morphology. We can speak now differently of topography and landforms. We can see the architect and the skateboarder kickflipping the diagram to make explosive geometry. Not in an art biennale, but here off grid and off the street



The bright surface functions as a three-dimensional projection field. Protagonists together with the trees produce those high-contrast dynamics. The play of light and shade turning into night-time mountain shadow. What language helps us understand the precision and cold beauty of this work? Known by skateboarders as 'landi', the place holds immediate value and challenge. A suggested new way of reading this landform would be to use the words *convergence* and *divergence*. This is model of cognition where tight spots emerge on the contour to be relieved, dispersed by more detached points. Spot-point-field; whatever vocabulary we resort to, we see the morphology, the topography and the terraforming all drawing out the intricacies of path and anti-path. Pedestrians and users, all protagonists in this theatre become observed and observing.



Not to skateboarders do we speak of tectonic lines, shifts in contour and content. Yet to the skateboarders this space too is 'writing', a scripting using the body on the body of the work. Moving from supermarket car parks until moved on by the police, 'landi' is now *freespace*, a skater's paradise. Wicked athletes they see themselves, they use the abbreviation 'fav' for the word favourite, they live their own language as action, both creative scripting and challenging movement. Landi is a go-to place. Now many are sponsored, kickflipping their way through a photo-shoot at sunset. *Insane plaza* is the new street name for the challenges offered, jumping the Noguchi landscape with its deceptively flat ground beneath their feet and board. Navigating those smooth curbs. Insane!



Do we see it through the software that has made the geometrical configurations possible? The surface texture of the concrete varies according to the type of geometrical configuration. Open joints, individual fields – this is the language of the architect and designer. Infrastructural elements shape the events which can take place anywhere on the square. All integrated in the construction and modulation of slab-fields of 100m² (max) of in-situ concrete, joined by bolts that deal with shearing forces. No drainage pits visible on the site, drainage of the whole square including the fountains is located at the open joints between the individual fields. In one corner water is levelled into the stepped layers of the water sculpture. A new fractal perhaps, the designers create an innovative buffer system which despite the existence of a subterranean garage, maintains all the visible surface water as it drains away within the landform. That's a neat trick.





This is 'novel tectonics' akin to dress patterning. A mannikin drawn horizontally, details pulled up, by the surgeon, the masseur, the forensic pathologist. The body takes shape. Material materialising in practice, matter and energy shaping the undulations, a layer of glass gravel holds the finishing top layer. A work meshed and sculptured on site, in the site, with the hand that strokes concrete until it held its density to form. This is a digital plasticity, where strokes are also human and field points on the site identified by slightly re-shifting the existing monuments on site. This is a post-mortem of land itself, a nip and tuck here or there where the re-distribution of matter and energy, parts or details become a surface within an organism. In careful, geometric relations cut by line and stencil, smoothed by digital meshing, informed by existing relations in a centre of the city, and formed and re-formed into what we could call a critical landscape. We get the sensory uplift of a re-constructed landscape.





In a city of spectres, marks and traces, Innsbruck becomes the careful arrangement of monument and memory. The atmosphere may be dominated by the rather leering facade of the Tyrolean provincial governmental building from the period of National Socialism facing the columned eagle-perching memorial. In spite of its visual appearance, the latter is a freedom monument commemorating the resistance against, and the liberation from, National Socialism. It acts as a giant cheese grater on site. Unequal memories unequally held are both rebellious and tranquil, this is less and less a 'holy' backdrop. The memorial on its upset ground turns it into sorcery; an urban condition delightfully contradictory, unresolved and prone to delicious ambiguity. Here the architects have inserted a flat, water-spouting area between the Landhaus and the memorial. Artificial physical features of a blind spot; wet and dry where the presence of water, skateboarder and skinny dipper play against the monument's historical significance. This not a scarred memory, but a necessarily blurred one. Just as low clouds slice off the top of the mountain that overlooks, overbears, overwhelms. This is a ghost form not so much ignoring any momentary new 'reading' of history but seeking new relational depth.



Did sea define the land or land the sea? The Irish poet Seamus Heaney writes. We ask not quite the same for this landlocked gem, but we know how each part of the day and night draws new meaning from the collisions brought to Landhaus Plaza. It is not the sea which breaks on land to full identity, it is matter and action; the geometry of expressive disorder. We will end with a small passage from the *Atlas of Novel Tectonics*. We might have used several. The one finally chosen is not the only one relevant, but it offers 'clues' to this critically welcoming space where others offer unfinished probes: 'We hold to the idea that architecture is not simply reducible to the container and the contained but that there exists a dynamic exchange between the life of matter and the matter of our lives.'" (Roger Connah 2022)



Information & Formation - About Landscape, Architecture and Cities Kathrin Aste & Frank Ludin. Park Books (2023)