

Performing Narratives - A collaborative critique of Rosa Barba finalist presentations at the 10th International Landscape Architecture Biennale, Barcelona 2018, "Performative Nature"

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For more on the projects: <https://landscape.coac.net/en/finalists-rosa-barba>

Introduction

Anaïs Leger-Smith (National School of Architecture of Toulouse, France)

Nine Landscape Architecture practices gave lectures at the 10th International Biennial of Landscape Architecture of Barcelona, September 2018. All were finalists for the Rosa Barba Prize. By taking a critical step-back from the lectures we gain a good overview on the state of the landscape profession today, its discourses, trends and future perspectives.

This collaborative critique results from a PhD course entitled 'Criticality in, on and for design, towards an understanding of criticism in landscape architecture and urban design', organized by the Swedish University of Agriculture Sciences and led by Pr. Lisa Diedrich and Pr. Andrea Kahn during the Biennial. The course's international participants came from diverse universities. Each participant

selected one lecture to critique, concentrating on revealing how the rhetoric was developed through presentation format, narrative discourse and style in each of the nine finalist presentations.

The authors provide two types of critiques. The first concerns subtle, minimal landscape interventions that respect sensitive sites and their contexts. These critiques refer to simple approaches, adopting a 'less is more philosophy', poetic evocations, a compassionate vision for our environment. They reassert values such as conviviality and dignity into the landscape discourse. The second type of critique concerns more commercially oriented projects with discourses and graphics aimed to sell wide-spread, dominant mainstream ideas. These critiques mention promotional heuristics, technocratic ecological approaches, unconvincing rhetoric as well as a lack of consideration for site context, political circumstances and ecological inclusiveness. Although some readers might be more drawn to the first type of critique, one shouldn't under-estimate the context, scale and pragmatic functions that any landscape project delivers to society. A residential public space should be critiqued in a different way than a memorial, a museum or a park.

Weaving language and imagery into project narratives is common throughout the landscape profession. Beyond the nature of the projects themselves, this collaborative critique explores diverse rhetoric and demonstrates the power of verbal and visual discourse. These discourses illustrate how landscape studios chose to present themselves. If well-constructed, they have the power to increase the value of some designs that lack in depth, while sometimes overselling the projects. Discourses can also strengthen an aspect of the design by poetically illustrating a project of great sensitivity.

The discourses critically reviewed here do not neatly fall into binary categories; they display a great deal of hybridity, beyond the boundaries of aestheticism or promotional marketing. The Rosa Barba prize lectures demonstrate the ability of the landscape profession to hybridize ideas, adapt to contingencies by combining elements, shapes and functions, addressing multiple duties and indicators, accepting successes and failures from detail to the human scale. This shows us that in landscape architecture today there is no one dominant strain of discourse but instead entwined and multiple narratives.

Landscape: Sacca Sessola Island Open Spaces and Historical Park, Venice

Design Team: CZ Associati

Andrea Conti (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences/SLU)

Laura Zampieri opens with a brief history of the artificial Island of Sacca Sessola in Venice. She shows birds' eye views of the position of the island in the Venetian lagoon and its historical evolution and land use: from a fuel depot to a hospital for tuberculosis patients to its abandonment in the late 70's. *So far, the premises for a project are very high!*

The presentation continues with birds' eye slides describing its restoration: re-conversion through reuse and recycling aimed to transform Sacca Sessola into a pleasant venue for tourists. The purpose of the project is revealed: a welcoming tourists' venue. *Almost too ordinary for the phenomenon, Venice.*

The design plans show all the project phases and the different parts of the island through the uses of birds' eye view. *Again?* Maps now alternate with a few pictures of materials and details. *Where are the people?*

Emphasis and enthusiasm are reserved for presenting the different parks on the island, the formal park and the 'km zero productive garden'. Nonetheless, the time taken to describe the 'mobile park' and its concept of 'soil regeneration' seems superfluous; crop rotation was already known before Christ and other parts of the project deserved further description. Finally, the video shows the details of the completed project from a drone's-eye view. *Not many people in the video, how does this prove the renewed 'liveability' of the island?*

Landscape: Jiahe River Country Park
Design Team: Beijing Forestry University
Daniel Valentini (SLU)

Yao Peng entered the stage with confidence, raising my expectations. He drew a dramatic picture, arguing that Yantai City on China's central east coast faces reoccurring challenges due to fluctuating seasonal water availability. Peng made a powerful claim that the Jiahe River Country Park mitigated all the socio-economic and environmental effects through far-reaching, multivalent services; the park contributes to mitigating four major challenges in the region: water resource availability, flood risk, environmental and ecological problems.

The initial slides are densely packed with large numbers that often do not allow comprehension of their relevance. What does it mean that: 'the total nitrogen in the Yantai Jiahe river is 14.3 times more than the total nitrogen, and the nitrate nitrogen exceeds the standard 0.45 times?' A non-scientific audience anticipated that this must be something bad, but the implications remained opaque. I am left slightly confused, but still holding high expectations about the contribution that the project claimed.

The middle part of the presentation helped only marginally to resolve my impression. It featured renderings and scenic photographs to introduce the park's individual design elements. How, and to what extent, these elements contribute to the ambitious, yet vague goals, is only hinted at. The audience is taken on a tour along the park boardwalks, to experience how the sum of these elements constitute a "typical" country park. The presentation suggested that form - the design of individual park elements and their combination to shape a country park - followed function, mainly permeable surfaces in combination with water retention elements. Peng left the impression that several water engineering exercises were shaped into a country park form.

Towards the end of the presentation, Peng finally returns to the park's multiple duties. He introduces another set of numbers to prove the park's positive influence on four clusters of indicators: resources, environment, flood risk and ecology. Again, the presenter's calm confidence let me anticipate their significance, but the slides made it hard to judge their relevance, leaving me with this take-away message: Landscape architecture can inform climate change adaptation projects by doing good in so many ways. It is hard to make them all comprehensible in a thirty-minute presentation.

Landscape: Landscapes of Cohabitation, Greece

Design Team: Doxiadis+

Eimear Tynan (Oslo School of Architecture: Institute of Urbanism and Landscape)

The architecture/landscape architecture firm, DOXIADIS +, began their presentation on a philosophical note before proceeding to their project *Landscapes of Cohabitation*. Thomas Doxiadis outlined the problems of the nature/culture divide that has been ingrained in our consciousness for centuries. This notion of 'man' over 'nature' and the creation of utopian landscapes does not fit into the age of the Anthropocene. We must, according to the Doxiadis, 'accept nature and landscape as it is' rather than continue with the conquest of 'goodness' over wilderness. From here the term 'entopia' was introduced, referring to the conditions of the site.

After this more serious but thoughtful introduction, a strong sense of humour prevails. The middle part of the presentation introduces us to the comical demands of clients (snake protection around a site) and the idyllic fantasies that clients have of Mediterranean landscapes. (Doxiadis blamed these on the 1980's American TV series, *Dynasty*.)

Aside from the ridiculous but very real client demands, the presentation addressed the difficulties and 'ugly truths' that designers must confront when partaking in construction projects located in sensitive landscapes. The DOXIADIS + landscape design was strongly influenced by reading the ecological typologies around the site and integrating plant species and patterns into the new scheme. It was a very welcome addition that they shared not only the successes of the project but the failures, as well.

Landscape: Performative and Transformative Quzhou Luming Park, China

Design Team: Turenscape

Johan Wirdelöv (SLU)

The strong urbanization of China has led to a loss of identity, Turenscape founder Kongjian Yu proclaims before presenting the urban context-located Quzhou Luming Park. The means for countering this gloomy state of affairs? A "performative approach". And once again a design project relies on that special phrase charged with a double punch of confidence and competence – *strategies* – to encompass an arrangement of ideas and interventions. This time we get a main strategy (quilting the terrain) that covers various sub-strategies (preserving assets, productive vegetation, adapting water processes).

Yu is the second biennial presenter today to describe place quality through number of visitors. The numbers seem high, but I am not sure what to compare them to. Even higher still the level of colour saturation in the photography. Quote from my scribbles: *Showing us the garden of Eden!* I also notice that when representing the site through a 'before and after' scheme, the before photo is black and white, although it must arguably have been snapped decades after colour photography became mainstream. 'Strategy', I guess, is the explanation here.

Landscape: Tel Aviv's Central Promenade Renewal, Israel

Design Team: Mayslits Kassif Architects

Katarina Bajc (HafenCity Universität Hamburg)

Ganit Mayslits Kassif Architects present their Tel Aviv's Central Promenade Renewal using a before/after narrative. With the power of a diet product commercial it seduces with a new, splendid appearance in comparison to the old, shabby look. The rhetoric is repetitive before/ after, before/ after... It convinces us with many 'after' photos taken on a sunny day, with happy, serene users enjoying the beach.

The description stays on a very sober and functional level, despite the designers' decision to have all three partners present the project, covering everything from technical solutions in detailing to the lifestyle atmosphere. There is no question; the area is much more attractive, and also more functional than before. The beach access is more fluid. Creating a buffer zone - the in-between area where nobody; at least nobody from certain milieus, is foreign - businessman in suits and bikini-clad beach volleyball players merge. The new project envelopes the old seamlessly, like a new dress when the fashion changes.

But the viewer is left wondering about the broader context. What might the real requalification of a public beach have been? Instead of the existing, obsolete state, what if ecological function, as well as the social inclusiveness, would have been the point of departure and the inspiration?

Landscape: Saxhóll Crater stairway, Iceland

Design Team: Landslag EHF

Ksenija Krsmanovic (University of Valladolid)

Saxhóll Crater Stairway, introduced as a simple, natural and pragmatic landscape intervention immediately gained sympathy from the audience. The presentation opening in a rather modest way, leaving us feeling a sense of belonging with this Atlantic, alpine landscape. The particularity of the place was described with a scene from a 1950s children's movie based on a Jules Verne novel. This showed the natural beauty, mysticism and particularity of the volcanic crater as the entrance to 'The Journey to the Centre of the Earth'.

The presenter then explained that drastically increasing tourist numbers in Iceland had started to deform Saxhóll Crater's landscape. The new stairway follows the hillside with its functional, simple solution, using the already spontaneously formed, easiest path from the bottom to the top. Its rusted steel colour imbeds it in the natural landscape and vegetation. Each easily replaceable unit of the stair links together into a horizontal chain from which there is enough space for a visitor to enjoy the ambience, while stepping towards the top. The minimalistic project contributes to the 'wow effect' of Iceland's stunning nature and creates a desire to visit the glacier which is gradually disappearing due to climate change. This presentation left me thinking: less is indeed more.

Landscape: San Michele Open Air Museum, Gorizia Karst

Design Team: Studio Paolo Bürgi

Pierre Oskam (University of Porto (Fine Arts)/University of Aveiro (Communication and Art)

During Paolo Bürgi's Biennial presentation, with colourful images and a calm voice, it became evident where Bürgi's design approach originated from: individual experience meeting poetic translations of the landscape's memorial atmosphere. Paolo aims to arouse the visitor through sensorial access to the sensitive memory and identity of the landscape - all with high regard for the landscape as an entity. The atmosphere is evoked through appreciation of the authentic character of the WWI Battles of the Isonzo, expressed by the geology and ecology of the Carso Goriziano landscape.

The Landscape Architect walked us through his work and his choices by quoting Italian poems and considering perceptive visualizations of materialization and emotional thoughtfulness of former times. His choices are 'paths, plants, cuts and views', re-drawing the attention to the presence of the landscape for 'the respect it deserves'.

In this exhibition, the role of the landscape architect is brought forward: the translator of a landscape's emotional and aesthetic value and the inducer of subliminal places for self-reflection. From this observation we could consider that the future of landscape architecture should be drawn upon delicate respect for past and presence - and this is why novel interventions should be minimal or less intrusive. Mentioning the Anthropocene, this perspective could definitely be amplified. However, the work stays anthropocentric. Nevertheless, Paolo Bürgi's elegant, empathic, humane discourse with the landscape unfolds a more compassionate relationship with our environment.

Landscape: Rosa Luxemburg Garden, Halle Pajol, Paris

Design Team: In Situ

Sabina Jallow, Department of Urban Studies, Malmö University

The French landscape architecture firm In Situ has made the prospering and sustainable Rosa Luxemburg Garden at the old tracks behind the Gare du Nord Station in central Paris. The garden forms part of a regeneration project, done in close collaboration with the architect firm Jourda, and is sited under the old roof of the previous train hall and NCF warehouse.

The presentation is built up around the garden as highly appreciated as a place for contemplation and social friendliness as well as on introducing new sustainable technique, such as solar panels and a system for reuse of grey water letting the water from the showers in the new hostel watering the flower beds. To support these arguments the presentation shows recent color photographs of meditating people in the morning light and children playing with water, combined with diagrams of the technical constructions.

I am convinced by the classic and neat presentation. This project originated in an investigation about the role this part of the city has played in the past, and how this project will contribute to the regeneration project. I believe that the garden is a nice place for hanging out as well as a pleasingly performed design and building project.

Linear Park, Mexico: Ciudad de México, Mexico

Gaeta-Springall Arquitectos

Anne Cunningham (Lincoln University, NZ & Copenhagen University, Denmark)

People plead: 'No. Please. No trees: robbers will drop on us from above'. Gaeta-Springall said they'd fill the place with dignity. They'd design it so the robbers would play basketball.

Gaeta-Springall beat their drum with the rhythms of the locale. They challenged architectural representation by asking: *who is this for?* Local characters riveted our hearts to the landscape and so we knew: *not for designers!*

Gaeta-Springall beat off international competitors to design 4.5km of train tracks as a park. They fought for local respect. They amplified the area's pragmatic materiality, elevating it into audacious, convivial culture. Curiously, they called it an urban forest: surely a forest of forms, and some trees, but not an ecosystem?

Gaeta-Springall KNOW professional design makes a difference: the rabble was roused, and we were ready for a coffee break...

WINNERS

ROSA BARBA PRIZE WINNER

Saxhöll Crater Stairway



ROSA BARBA PRIZE SPECIAL MENTION & PUBLIC OPINION PRICE

LINEAR PARK CUERNAVACA RAILROAD



PUBLIC OPINION

LINEAR PARK CUERNAVACA RAILROAD

