

Between the Lines:

On the Explicit and Implicit in Writing and Building

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The dualism between the external and internal world had preoccupied philosophers for millennia . . . for a scientist such as Humboldt . . . this was the most important question. Humans were like citizens of two worlds, occupying both the world of the *Ding an sich* (the thing-in-itself) which was the external world, and the internal world of one's perception. A. Wulf, *The Invention of Nature*¹

Literary and spatial narratives have a central theme in common: both weave together, in a moment-by-moment interchange, the human experience of place and the physical place itself, shedding light on the fluid interactions between these inner and outer worlds. The narrative offered by the author – whether a writer or a designer – presents an imagined world into which the



Fig. 1. Goethe In Italy III, Cy Twombly, 1978
Twombly's painting leaves the reading of the image to the mind's eye. With no hierarchy or focus, the eye gazes again and again at the painting, creating a new imaginative reading with each viewing.

reader/user can enter. The 'inner world' of personal experience and 'outer world' of built environment are in dialogue, mutually involved in the creation and interpretation of narratives.

This article aims to reveal and articulate specific uses of literature to inform the design of contemporary urban place as used by Studio Vulkan Landscape Architecture. The literature is employed to access a deeper understanding of place and the ways in which people experience and describe place. In a non-linear, back-and-forth process, the two-fold reading and designing of the specific qualities and potential experiences of a site feed each other, step by step, to design the most potent experience possible. Literature has the power to expose, name and describe often barely perceptible phenomena of human experience. Such precise observations offered by literary description render the experiential world accessible to the designer. Literature offers the reader a heightened sense of awareness of being and place. Both writing and building build on the unspoken, the implicit, and the approximation of sussing out realities.

By using this experiential richness in literature in the design process, Studio Vulkan aims to achieve an equal richness of experience of place. Historically, cities, with their wild, uncontrolled spontaneity, have been great sources of what British writer Alastair Bonnet refers to as the 'geographical imagination'.³ However, with the ever-increasing standardization and commercialization of building culture, including open spaces, this potential is under threat. Vulkan's projects aim to reveal the magical and unforeseen subtlety of a site, acting as catalysts of imagination and embodied experience, and imbuing open space with what might be considered, to again quote Bonnett, a 'geographical re-enchantment': the meeting of the inner and outer worlds. Vulkan aims to do what in German would be called *aufspüren*, to trace or track down the potential of a given site, transforming it as far as possible into a source for geographical re-enchantment.

To this end, in writing and in building, Studio Vulkan has developed a series of *atmospheres* as instruments to work with the human experience of place in a more profound and differentiated way. The four atmospheres presented here are *Atmosphere of Space*, considering form and spatial sensation; *Atmosphere of Time*, addressing the implications of constructing the ephemeral; *Atmosphere of the Mind*, exploring the unique sensory experience of being in the woods; and *Atmosphere of Sound*, a reflection on the reinterpretation of a staple of contemporary urban infrastructure, noise barriers, into a positive contribution for experiencing the modern city. In the following paragraphs, we will pair these *atmospheres* with literature that has inspired the concepts of places in the process of reading and designing.

Atmosphere of Space: Sculpting Spatial Sensation

*Space (designated) as a system of relations, is denoted by prepositions . . . ‘over’ or ‘under’, ‘before’ or ‘behind’, ‘at’, ‘within’, ‘on’, ‘upon’, ‘to’, ‘from’, ‘along’.*⁴

*Christian Norberg-Schulz, **Genius Loci***

In his book *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Norwegian architect and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz elucidates the subtle, often only subconsciously perceptible dynamics of bodily sensations as moving and being within space and place. These prepositions offer a remarkably potent tool to understand how landscape can be sculpted to become a place of embodied experience. The following two projects explicitly employ this principle, offering the user a narrative choreography of the specific place: a glacial moraine and a shoreline as the meeting point between land and water.

The site for the new Zurich Airport Circle Park (2017) is a glacial moraine deposit that has been continually altered over time by large-scale infrastructure projects. The new park physically takes visitors through the historical

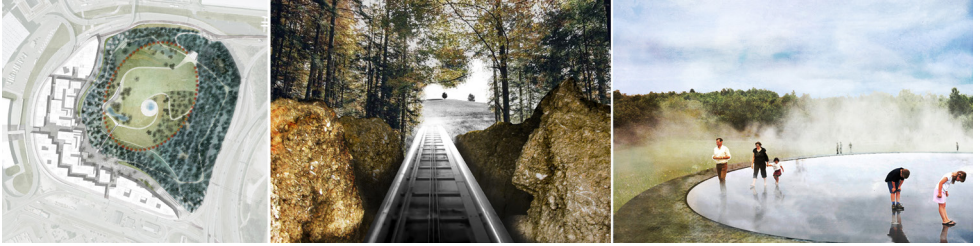


Fig. 2. Circle Park, Studio Vulkan, Zurich, 2017

(left) The new Zurich Airport Circle Park, a glacial moraine altered over time by large-scale infrastructure as well as ecological projects, takes visitors physically through the historical landscape layers of the park in a sequence of bodily spatial experiences;

(centre) 'Below' ground in the crevices of an archaic Swiss glacial moraine;

(right) 'Above' ground, upon a reflecting sky platform addressing the universal sky.

landscape layers of the park. This happens in a relatively linear, continuously ascending sequence of bodily spatial experiences: from 'below' ground in crevices of archaic Swiss glacial gravel; to 'on' the ground, across the peculiarly deformed topography of dredge spoil (or infrastructural excavation); finally arriving 'above' ground, upon a viewing platform lifted into the encompassing sky – the one and only sky, which all international users of the airport share no matter what their land of origin.

The task for Lugano Paradiso's new Waterfront Promenade (2016) was to reconnect the town with its lake and shoreline five metres below the town, largely privately owned and in the shade. Here two spatial tools were used. First, in contrast to the linear sequence described above, the promenade unfolds in a nonlinear sequence of deliberately contrasting spatial connections between land and water – *toward, near, along, at, above, on, to* and *in* the water – effectively inclusive of the entire inventory of spatial relations described by Norberg-Schulz. In addition to this, the age-old painterly trick of foreground/middle ground/background was employed along the shoreline, using the silhouettes of trees to poetically frame the fortunate, sunlit opposite shore of the lake and the surrounding mountains.

The Atmosphere of Time: Constructing the Ephemeral

I hope to investigate the meaning of wild . . . one must take on the basic conditions . . . painful, impermanent, open, imperfect . . . decomposed: Life in the wild is not just eating berries in the sunlight. I like to imagine a 'depth ecology' [of] the dark side of nature . . . crunched bones in scat, feathers in the snow . . . wild systems are . . . irrational, mouldy, cruel.⁵
Gary Snyder, *Practice of the Wild*

Articulating the powerful experience of uncontrolled growth and decay, Snyder's writings about the wild and 'the green man in us all' have played a pivotal role in many of Vulkan's projects focusing on the experience and



Fig. 3. Waterfront Promenade Lugano Paradiso, Studio Vulkan, Lugano, 2016
The promenade reconnects the town with its lakeshore, unfolding a sequence of varied spatial connections between land and water: toward, across, along, at, above, on, to and in the water.

imagery of uncontrolled nature taking over her surroundings. Having become accustomed to the common ideal of nature in the contemporary city – that is to say, ‘clean and orderly’ – the appearance of processes of decay intuitively challenges our sense of control over nature. The following projects confront this supposition, juxtaposing these two different ideas of beauty – that of controlled, conventional urban nature and that of uncontrolled wildness – playing them against each other, offering renewed relations to the ‘dark side’ of nature.

In the outdoor exhibition *Wildwood I*, installed in the historic garden of the Architecture Forum Lugano, glossy photographs of Studio Vulkan’s projects were mounted on papier-mâché tree trunks and displayed in the garden over six winter months. In the companionable context of this horticultural habitat, the tree trunks and the images of landscape projects, which themselves took many years to design and build, were deliberately given to and taken over by nature herself, as delicate representations decaying and virtually disappearing over the course of the exhibition.

At the new Campus Toni Areal, a converted yoghurt factory in Zurich hosting the University of the Arts (2014), an enormous roof garden had to fulfil a long list of technical requirements, including to be built in within a very limited timeframe. In response to this highly unnatural qualification of nature, the garden was pre-cultivated in boxes to allow for the creation of an instant garden ‘on call’. From the opening day of the project these boxes began a process of decomposing, as plants grew and broke their way out, becoming wild and turning the rooftop into an uncontrolled, overgrown setting within the prescribed parameters. The art students are witnesses to this gradual takeover by nature, while otherwise occupying themselves within the fragrant gentleness of this living green mess.



Fig. 4. Wildwood I, Studio Vulkan, Architecture Forum Lugano, 2014
 (left) Photos of Studio Vulkan's projects mounted on papier-mâché tree trunks and displayed in the garden over six winter months.
 (right) The decay of the landscape project photos, which took many years to design and build, taken over by nature herself, decaying over the course of the exhibition.



Fig. 5. Toni Areal Roof Garden, Studio Vulkan, Zurich, 2015
 (left) A highly unnatural natural place – a pre-cultivated garden in boxes creating an instant garden on call.
 (right) On opening day of the school the boxes began their process of decomposing. Plants break out, becoming wild and turning the rooftop into an uncontrolled, overgrown setting.

Atmosphere of Mind: Immersive Experience of Nature

Nowhere (but in the woods) are the two great modes of reproducing reality, the word and the camera, more at a loss... (the woods) defeat view-finder, drawing paper, canvas, they cannot be framed; and words are as futile, hopelessly too laborious to capture reality.⁶

*John Fowles, **The Tree***

The woods are a unique physical environment. The sensations of immersion and emersion, the vagueness in bodily orientation and the attentive state of mindfulness found here are distinct. Fowles deliberately discloses to us the ultimate futility of any effort to comprehensively capture the power of this experience. Describing this elusive, drifting and even disorienting experience of being immersed in a forest contrasts sharply with Western spatial traditions of logic, rationality and hierarchy, where spatial reading is rigorously pre-planned and rather forcefully asserted. The opportunity to experience places that stimulate our imagination in the contemporary city is becoming increasingly rare. In this regard, woodlands offer a peculiar landscape experience where there is no forward or backward, no obvious hierarchy or focal point. Moving through the forest, like swimming in water, leaves one to drift and get lost in its non-hierarchical sensation.

Within ever-shrinking landscape territories at the edges of cities there is an increasing wish to immerse ourselves in 'landscape' just minutes from home. The Wildwood Plaza project (2014) is intended to allow visitors to experience the sensation of woodlands a stone's throw from neighbouring suburbia. In this project, three circular clearings are established just hundreds of metres apart on a wooded hill. Each of these highlights its distinct existing woodland typology and expresses its response to the particular climatological conditions of that tiny ecotope: a stately woodland cathedral of high beech crowns on the protected side of the hill, a dense jungle of pioneer beeches where storms razed the existing forest, and a bizarre



Fig. 6. Wildwood Plaza, Studio Vulkan, Zurich, 2014
Woodlands offer a diffuse, intangible spatial experience of landscape.

landscape of disformed, tilted trees thrown about by storms but continuing to grow in their odd survival positions. These small natural ‘plazas’ function in a way that is similar to a cyclorama, presenting, in a 360-degree view, dramatically different immersive woodland situations.

Atmosphere of Sound: Poetics of Urban Infrastructure

There is no such thing as an empty space or . . . time. There is always something to see (or) hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot . . . and this silence almost anywhere in the world today is traffic. If you listen to Beethoven, it's always the same; but if you listen to traffic, it's always different.⁷

*John Cage in **Ecoute** by Miroslav Sebestik*

With natural light no day is like another, no moment like another.⁸
*Louis Kahn, **Light is the Theme***

These two quotations, addressing sound and light, informed the concept for a noise abatement wall between a main traffic artery and a residential neighbourhood at the western city entrance to Zurich (2014). Both writers are masters of encompassing the phenomenal world in simple statements. Their common focus is that of experiencing the poetry of the changing, unforeseeable everyday urban world around us. Cage goes a step further, comparing the ubiquitous experience of listening to traffic with the cultural sublimity of listening to Beethoven. And traffic wins his beauty contest. His singular ability to put into words his fascination with traffic today is startling and eye-opening. Cage's writings gave Studio Vulkan the courage to visually celebrate rather than temper traffic as an urban experience, inspiring the project's concept. The wall, 4.5 m high and 800 m long, buffers sound while capturing light – reinterpreting and recalibrating the usual negative connotations of traffic infrastructure as poetic material that can further enrich our daily urban experience.



Fig.7. Noise Abatement Wall, Studio Vulkan, Zurich, 2014

Etched glass panels reflect and display abstracted, fleeting images of the city as blurred and ephemeral visual impressions of the urban periphery.

The design consists of etched glass panels with varying degrees of blurriness and light diffusion that become surfaces of projection for the moment-by-moment modulations of the periphery landscape of Zurich. The glass panels reflect and display abstracted, ephemeral images of the city as unfocused and changing visual impressions separated from their acoustic environment. Similar to the peculiar effect of an avant-garde film or real-time painting, the fleeting imagery of traffic patterns, natural and artificial light and movement of urban dwellers unfold along the length of the project.

Despite our endeavours here to articulate the experiential world, both written and designed, as clearly and coherently as possible, we believe, in fact, that which is 'between the lines' to be the real substance of the work discussed in this essay. It is the tracing and tracking down of the enigmatic quality of a place that has the power of geographical re-enchantment. In each instance, narratives can give clues, intimations, but their power is ultimately derived from the first-hand experience of an atmosphere, something that remains, and must remain, unspoken.

- 1 Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature* (London: John Murray, 2015), 35.
- 2 *Oxford American College Dictionary, Indexed Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 3 Alastair Bonnett, *What is Geography?* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008).
- 4 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1980), 16.
- 5 Gary Snyder, *Practice of the Wild* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 118.
- 6 John Fowles, *The Tree* (New York: Ecco, 2010), xiii.
- 7 Miroslav Sebestik, *Ecoute* (film, interview with John Cage) (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1992).
- 8 Louis Kahn, *Light is the Theme* (New Canaan, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 17.