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Landscape Interventions for Embracing New Wilderness

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ABSTRACT

Under the guise of improving human wellbeing, capitalist societies focus on economic growth and expansion, while neglecting the decline of abandoned urban structures. We approach the results of this abandonment as “new wilderness” landscape: a hybrid of spontaneous nature and architectural decay. Abandoned, wild places still have a negative connotation. However, these places are an inevitable part of the urban fabric, containing potential social and ecological benefits. The question is: how can landscape interventions make this idea of wilderness more acceptable, so that the beneficial aspects can be recognized and allowed to develop? Hence this research, makes the case, it is through small interventions that could alter people’s perception and allow natural succession. Four projects working with the aforementioned new wilderness concept were selected. By reviewing their attitude towards new wilderness, several conflicts between human intervention and wilderness arise. These conflicts aid us in emphasizing accessibility, flexibility and difference as guiding principles for landscape design as tool for embracing new wilderness.

INTRODUCTION

Urban decline as taboo

“Without targeted action, many local and regional governments are unlikely to gain control over the socio-economic and physical decline of an ever-increasing number of urban settlements” (Wiechmann in: Haase

et al, 2012, p. 40). The effects of shrinkage¹ are “fought against”, while large scale urban planning has proven to fail more often than to succeed. The difficulties in finding an appropriate response to decline, are associated with the strong linkage between planning, development and growth patterns, that lead one to the idea that decline is a threat or taboo (Sousa and Pinho, 2015, p. 17) However, we cannot afford to think that all abandoned buildings, industrial sites, forgotten farmland and overlooked interstices can be either transformed, hidden or simply ignored; their scale and complexity makes necessary to engage with these sites; however, we cannot forebear redevelopment accordingly to private investors’ expectations or call for governmental action. In addition to the negative connotations of abandonment, finding a response is complicated by insufficient knowledge on how to approach this problem.

Accepting abandonment

Within the “third-generation city”² new balance must be sought between social use and ecological values, that build upon human scale activities (Casagrande, 2013). The romantic attitude³ towards decay and nature could be re-interpreted; not only as an aesthetic pursuit, but as an ethical issue to mediate the accumulating consequences of rapid growth around the world. We aim to welcome the notion of abandonment, human neglect and wilderness as part the existing fabric, what results in several missions: developing an understanding of this hybrid landscape as a whole, how design could provide room for unpredictability and how it could alter the negative connotations of abandonment or wilderness.

Embracing “new wilderness” within the totality of the landscape

Shrinkage could be seen as equal

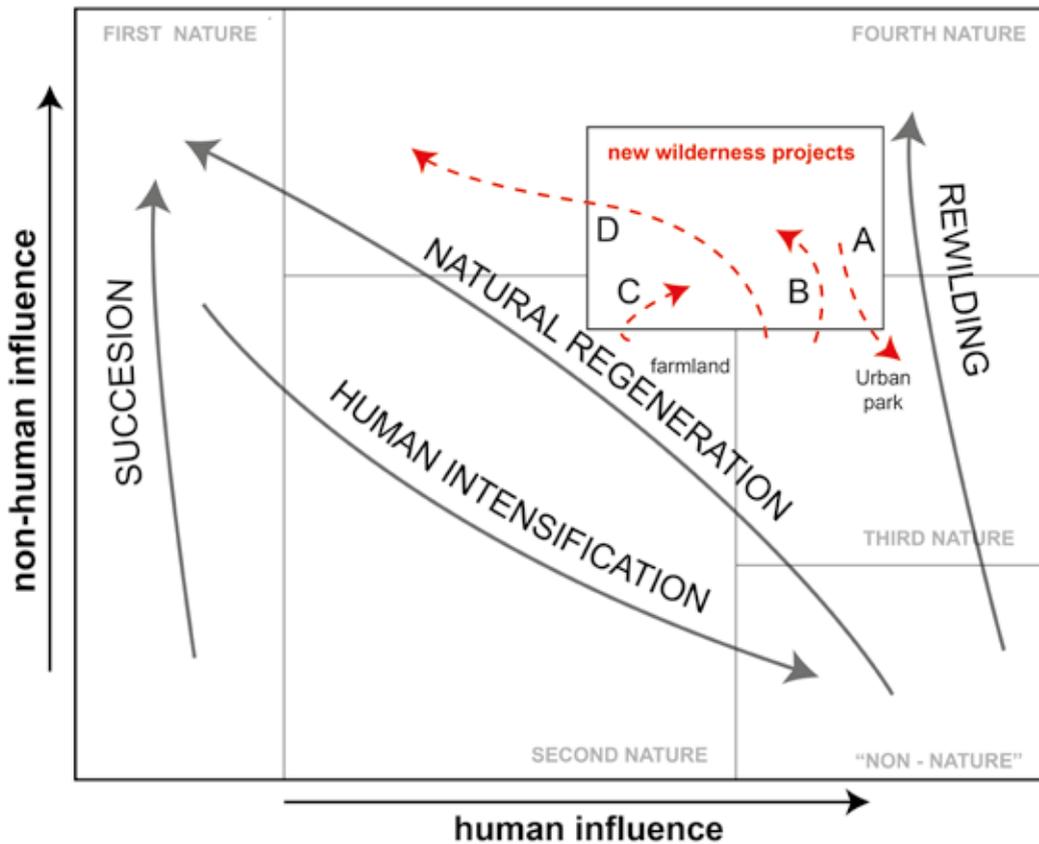


Figure 2: Types of action and position of the projects

of play - from destructive, hedonistic, artistic, adventurous and explorative (Edensor, 2005). Spontaneous vegetation and chaotic material spur the imagination, and has been proven beneficial in children's playgrounds. The passing of time, tangible through vegetation cycles, decaying textures, and changing morphology is an ongoing palimpsest expressing a site-specific, authentic character or "genius loci". Therefore also "new wilderness" offers an alternative to the predictable spaces in our daily lives and becomes "a means to critique the over-regulated way contemporary urban space is formed" (Edensor, 2005, p. 94). It could offer biodiversity, demonstrate succession within the urban fabric and allow room for species that find no place in for example intensified

agriculture. Newly formed micro-climates, often due to the abandoned buildings, shape new unique balances (Kowarik, 2013). Making vacant lots part of daily life could provide access to unique green places, create jobs, pollination opportunities, and rain water retention; reduce municipal spending and raise land value. Challenges are the different priorities of stakeholders, increased risk of vandalism, a fear of disorder, eco-gentrification and costs to purchase land (Anderson and Minor, 2017). Wilderness often obscures visibility of the site, can contribute to a reduced sense of safety or become the source of undesired encounters with animal wildlife (Rall and Haase, 2011). Green places with consistent human cultivation, are perceived more safe (Kuo, 2003). However, spaces

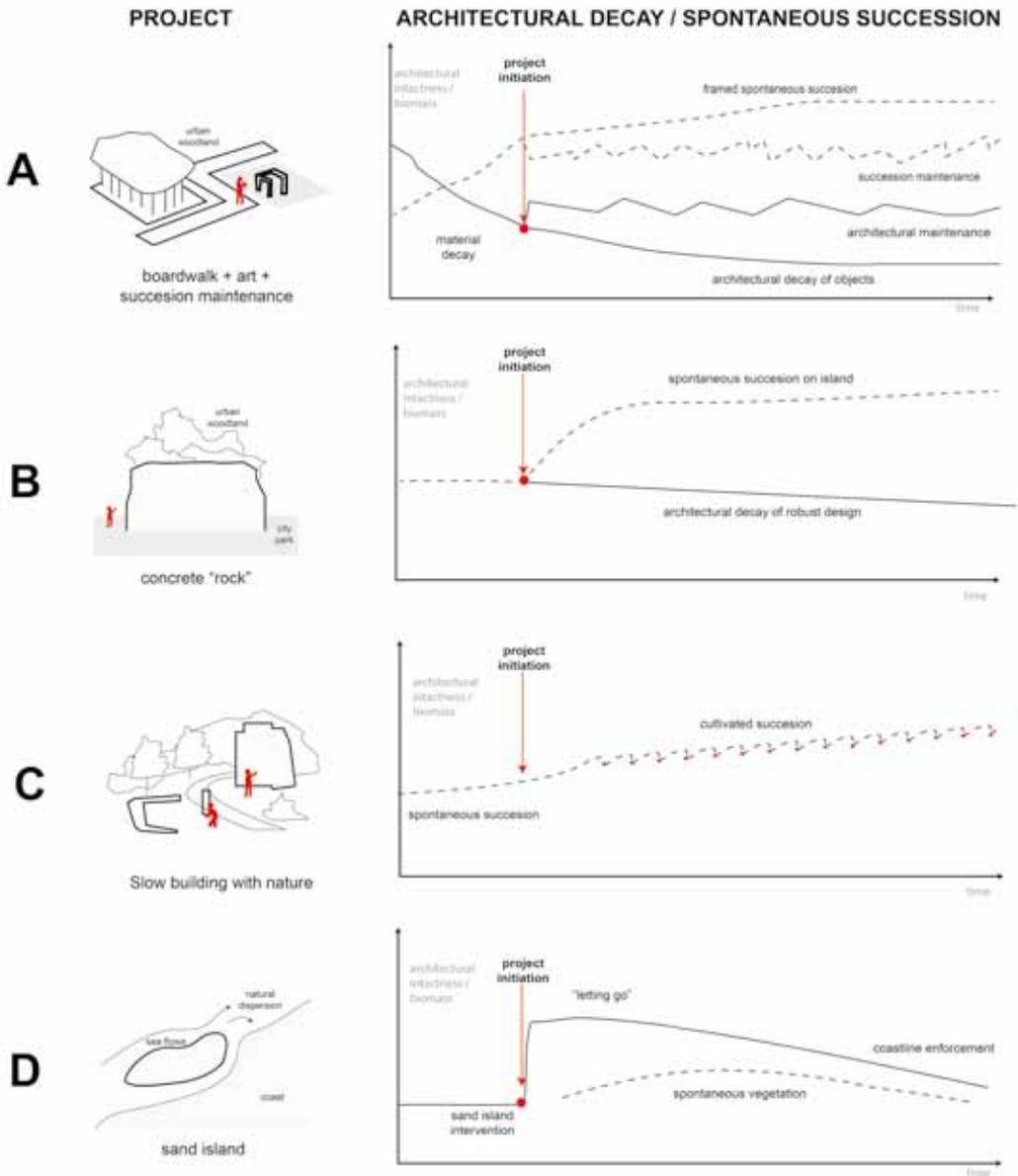


Figure 3: Project review diagram: main elements and interventions

that contain unpredictability can be more valued by surrounding residents (Jorgensen, Hitchmough and Dunnett, 2005). As a hybrid of human and natural properties without authority, new wilderness connects life with the local spot. Design could play a role making these spaces recognized and valued, without altering their existent qualities and potential benefits.

MATERIAL AND METHOD OF THE APPROACH

The grounded theory approach is used as a method to reflect the experiences of the researcher with literature review (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). The inquiry of qualities of abandoned places was done through a "collective case study" (Diedrich, 2013). Over forty abandoned places in Portugal were regularly visited

during a period of 12 months, where sketching, recording, photography and notes were used to collect data. The fieldwork by foot was sometimes with a group of residents or tourists, other times in collaboration with a fellow researcher⁶, while most visits were done alone.

For this paper, four design projects (Table 1) have been chosen to reflect upon the question how abandonment could be applied as a part of design. Following the grounded theory approach, the projects also were visited. The site visitation was guided by “the inventive analysis” in landscape architecture (Lassus, 1998) where the visitor aims to become one with the place without pre-determined, result orientated analysis, staying open for unexpected encounters. After review, conflicts between design and new wilderness became apparent.

TOWARDS A TIPPING POINT FOR A NEW WILDERNESS VALUATION

We consider that designers often are hasty in re-territorializing space. Nevertheless, leaving space completely undefined seems not to be the solution; especially abandoned lots often have lost their potential to autonomously develop and further degrade over time. Small changes can influence user behavior and ecological growth beyond their conventionally linked scale or investment. The term “urban acupuncture” is an idea that multiple small-scale projects have a cumulative impact to a larger scale (Casagrande, 2010). “Minimal interventions” as tactical and small designs can impact the understanding of a landscape and “produce transformation in the landscape experience” (Riley in: Lassus, 1998, p. 9), creating an altered notion of a place like Gordon Matta Clark’s cutting projects, or Rosalind Krauss’s indexing in photography. Landscape design could provoke another idea of

new wilderness and affect how people engage with it.

DISCUSSION

Towards understanding what role interventions could effectively play, four projects were visited. We examine what aspects could help promote the new wilderness concept and determine how they shape the image of existing preconceptions of new wilderness. In what way do these projects adopt and create room for wilderness? Moreover, what could these projects tell us about possible future design for new wilderness?

A) Natur-park Südgelände: Wilderness aesthetic and identity

Natur-Park Südgelände was an abandoned railyard with a thriving woodland succession – an example of new wilderness. After decades of abandonment, the introduced maintenance, boardwalk and art pieces enhanced the user experience and biodiversity, creating a controlled wilderness aesthetic, which made it more visually accessible to the visitor (see figure 3). Some decaying objects have been re-positioned for aesthetic display, that helped create a strong identity for the park. The clear contrast of the boardwalk and the abandoned land, fits the “difference” concept (Braae, 2015) where the intervention and the intervened landscape have such a contrasting language, one becomes a stage for the other. A conflict arises between the integrity of wilderness and democracy of space, opposed to regulation and ownership; the abandoned buildings are not accessible anymore, walking is confined to pathways and the graffiti tunnel can only be used for spraying on scheduled times. The project appears to embrace the visual experience of new wilderness, accessed urban forestry and decaying heritage. However, this comes at a price as Natur-park Südgelände ultimately

became a “third nature” urban park with “fourth nature’s” appearance (see figure 2), only containing small areas of “the forsaken”. This case shows that, to go beyond the wilderness aesthetics towards a true acceptance of its spontaneity, approaches could experiment more with limited, or open-ended programming, and less intensive interventions.

B) Derborance Island: Wilderness presence and visibility within the city

Derborance Island is a concrete plateau with the planted vegetation on its top left untouched, creating a visible wilderness and an oasis for biodiversity within the city (figure 3). This robust design insures a resilient and protected place (figure 2). Interestingly, the “island” has been disliked by surrounding residents (Gandy, 2013). The original plan included a telescope for an observation point on its border and could have helped enhance visibility of the wilderness within the city by framing its aesthetic and ecological worth. As the project is now, the high border between the maintained park and the wilderness makes it difficult for the visitor to immerse themselves and acclimate to a wilderness environment. A future project could work with bringing the visitors closer to the wilderness by enhancing the physical or visible accessibility of the wilderness.

C) Ecocathedraal: Wilderness interaction and protection

The Ecocathedraal consists of interventions while letting nature around “re-wild”. It is an example of natural regeneration and artistic cultivation on a former agricultural land, that results in the project having elements of second, third and fourth nature (figure 2). The Ecocathedraal is opening up people’s acceptance of spontaneity, where the interventions are a reaction to the behavior of natural processes and vice versa (figure 3). The work is

a dance between decay, spontaneous nature and people. However, the set of rules are a blueprint given by the initiating artist Louis Le Roy. In another context, this project would have problems maintaining these rules, as well as protecting the natural processes. Interaction and playful exploration with wilderness can only be accomplished when nature has its own space, and its growth is considered at least equal to those of human visitors. It might be necessary to create conditions that natural elements can be guaranteed to grow undisturbed.

D) De Zandmotor: Experiencing change and acknowledging natural forces

The Zandmotor island is an example of using the natural processes of nature as an instrument for human purposes--- building with nature (figure 2). This attitude demands an adaptive and open perspective: the island is built, but its future shape is left to the hands of sea and wind. There is a deliberate approach to bring awareness of the natural processes that are beyond human control, and that the desired completed image, is only achieved through nature’s response to the human intervention (figure 3). Meanwhile, the project became recognized, attracting tourists, kite-surfers and a diversity of bird species. The typical visitor is enabled to experience the ever-changing shape of the island, comprehending that it would eventually disappear. This idea of limitation and decline could illuminate temporal notions to the visitor, and in turn could help them accept such aspects in abandoned lots.

CONCLUSION

Landscape projects that advocate for embracing or gracefully “letting go” architectural decay and spontaneous nature, provide a platform and a tipping point for acceptance of “new

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NOTES

wilderness” as part of the landscape totality; and can demonstrate the value of their aesthetic, ecological and social benefits to the surrounding or broader context. It could bring the idea of new wilderness to the next level -- where it is not only valued pragmatically at a distance but adopted within the urban fabric and daily life. In reviewing four projects, several conflicts between human and nature arise. There is: manicured wilderness aesthetic versus untouched authentic nature; clear constraints and rules versus authority-free loose space; protected territory versus accessible interactive wilderness; and finally maintaining predictable environments versus allowing change. Landscape design projects for new wilderness could facilitate transitional, clear but adaptive borders between what is controlled and not, so interaction and spontaneous development are made possible in-between. In new wilderness, the distinction between the human sphere and inaccessible wilderness is gradual and changing.

Drawing on the reviewed projects, accessibility, protection, flexibility and difference are principles that could mediate this in-between. Interventions could increase acceptance of new wilderness by enabling access to new wilderness; permitting change and unpredictability through flexible designs; and creating structures to frame the wilderness in such way it becomes comprehensible, accessible for visitors, while simultaneously guarding wilderness from superimposition. In reflection upon shrinkage or decline, it is relevant to be adaptive to the continuously changing borders between human, natural and new wilderness territories. Minimal interventions applying “acupuncture” could be a strategic approach.

¹ Before the industrialisation of Europe, cities were mainly dependent of and shaped by agriculture. The rapid growth and urbanisation as result of industrialisation changed the image of the agricultural European landscape towards an urbanised one, fragmenting the landscape with highways and large-scale building projects. With the globalisation of market and industry, agricultural production is no longer profitable in a small scale on poorer land, industry is moving elsewhere, jobs and population are densifying in urbanised areas. This dynamic contributes a great deal to the abandonment of industrial, agricultural and residential structures

² The “first-generation city” before industrialization was more or less in balance with its context while the “second-generation city” was formed by light urbanization within natural constraints. The “third-generation city” was shaped by rapid growth and industrialization, exploited the land and now often has to deal with abandoned fabric (Casagrande, 2013).

³ During the romantic period, the narrative impact that the classic and medieval ruins inspired was valued, as we can see in works like Italian artist Piranesi’s drawings of ruination or built ruin folly’s in romantic landscape gardens.

⁴ “Processes of decay and disintegration can be culturally [as well as ecologically] productive, and, in a certain context, it is possible to look beyond loss to conceive other ways of understanding and acknowledging material change” (DeSilvey, 2017, p. 5).

⁵ “The growing interest in marginal urban landscapes has tended to repeatedly emphasize the utilitarian potential of so-called ‘waste spaces’ rather than their intrinsic qualities. There is an implicit mistrust of ‘letting things be’ or thinking creatively about how spontaneous processes of ecological change might enrich the city in unexpected ways.” (Gandy, 2013: 263).

⁶ Sitong Luo, PhD candidate at TU Delft, Faculty of Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences. Sitong’s PhD work explores the open-ended design question of urban leftover spaces with an analytical framework of multiple lenses and studies three case studies of design transformation.

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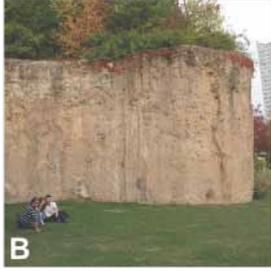
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TABLES

Table 1. Photos and summary of selected projects

 <p>(Image by Author)</p>	<p>A) Natur-park Südgelände, Berlin, Germany</p> <p>Over four decades of abandonment, this railyard became an untouched wilderness in an urban setting. The original railway wilderness had been altered by a new path system, succession maintenance and art objects (Kowarik and Langer, 2005). It was included for its strong integration of post-industrial heritage, urban woodland and social function.</p>
 <p>(www.gillesclement.com 20-5-2018)</p>	<p>B) Derborance Island, Lille, France</p> <p>A 2,500 square meters concrete rock, designed by Gilles Clément invites the “third landscape” in the urban environment. On the artificial rock, nature can develop undisturbed. The space introduces a wilderness landscape within a dense urban context, that demonstrates the contrasting beauty of visible disorder and natural spontaneity (Clement, 2015).</p>
 <p>(I Wouda, 2007)</p>	<p>C) Ecocathedraal, Herenveen, The Netherlands</p> <p>The Ecocathedraal project started with simply stacking leftover bricks gifted by the municipality. Its initiator LeRoy saw the wild, overgrown nature area as place where nature and humans could freely interact. The incremental development of walls and paths, provides a platform for dialogue and discussion on decay. This project builds upon continuous interventions that help heighten awareness to the transformation of the site.</p>
 <p>(www.dezandmotor.nl 20-5-2018)</p>	<p>D) De Zandmotor, Kijkduin, the Netherlands</p> <p>De Zandmotor island project works with the forces of the sea and the wind to cause coastal fortification. This project can be seen as building with nature: landscape forms evolve from the entropic development through a specific intervention. The island broadens the perspective of approaches towards decay by using wilderness or decay as motor.</p>