

Landscape in times of war

It rarely happens that a major cultural award is dedicated to an architectural subject. Art and scholarship, and in particular literature and science, take priority. Just very occasionally, an architect - someone of international standing like Renzo Piano or Richard Rogers - comes away with a cultural prize. But how often do the laurels go to a firm which is known only by a clutch of initials and which specializes in an obscure field like landscape design? Has landscape design acquired artistic status?

The firm H+N+S recently won the royal Prince Bernhard Fonds Culture Prize, one of the biggest prizes available in the Netherlands. It is a token of recognition for a firm that has gained a reputation not only for designing the Dutch landscape but also for contributing to growing awareness of the nature of landscape, of its vulnerability, and of the part it can play as a visual indicator of the main social dilemmas that face us. H+N+S not only solves problems but highlights them and opens the consequences of choices to discussion. Culture and nature coincide in this work. The award from the Prince Bernhard Fonds is, in this respect, a well-deserved plaudit.

Still, there is something remarkable about this new appreciation for landscape. It is not just a matter of raising awareness but of a grand gesture; a last-ditch effort to get a grip on something that eludes us more and more. The work of H+N+S is not so much representative of a capacity to shape the world to our taste as of a bold attempt to counteract the increasingly widespread tendency to fragment the world into, on the one hand, private portions, and on the other, *terrains vagues*. In other words, the firm's work stands for the effort it takes us to shape our environment according to our conscience instead of according to our instincts.

Once upon a time the concept of landscape stood for civilization. A well-known story relates of the early Renaissance poet Petrarch climbing Mount Ventoux to enjoy the prospect. He ascended to a great height so as to survey the unique landscape of Provence. Landscape was a kind of domestication of nature, an abstraction of its dangers. Seeing nature as landscape meant that chaos could be tamed.

The design tradition that emerged from this outlook on nature has always professed that same optimism. Landscape was a question of a low horizon, of prospect and enjoyment, of control and cultural authority. And landscape design was the *mis-en-scène* of all these things. Wherever the eye surveyed, design held sway. Landscape was, in other words, a token of security.

Security. Who feels secure now? We live in a time when nothing seems safe any more. And I am not just talking about the threat of terrorism. I refer to doubts about the whole classical, humanistic world view from which landscape design sprang. This is the age of El Niño. Of chaos theory. Of probability relations. Of nondescript suburbia. Of networks that develop holes. Of generic cities. Of muddled planning and urban sprawl around every village. And, indeed, of a global coalition against one man hiding in a cave somewhere. Amid all this, our concern for the landscape is greater than ever. It is the dimension within which we understand the incredible: that Mohammed Atta

attacked the symbol of urbanity. That bombs are exploding over the barren land. It is a battle of skyscrapers against caves. Without landscape, there can be no comprehension. The skyline of the Big Apple has been mutilated. The mountains of Afghanistan are desolate, impossible terrain for ground troops. Things are getting out of hand.

The concept of landscape helps us understand a little bit of what is happening to us. It no longer stands for control and authority, for contemplation of the grand prospect, but for a final attempt to keep a grip on a system that is rapidly falling apart. The landscape is always patient. It unites extremes. It has its peaks and valleys, lands and seas, towns and farmlands; it is the most tolerant and all-embracing concept we have at our disposal. It offers consolation. We still matter. We still understand.

Well then, if you are capable of converting that consoling function of landscape into a form, into a plan and its implementation, you are not only an important factor in shaping the country, you also give people back some of their self-confidence. Landscape as a popular concept is a subtle indication of fear. But landscape as a human artefact demonstrates that that fear can be conquered.

Ole Bouman

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Now we know we are nothing BUT context and that context changes everything. (see p. 2)