ON LANDSCAPE
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The projects that we have considered for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture were sometimes related to extreme situations of crisis or impoverishment, which, I think, raise new issues. I was touched to see that these projects’ procedures – their transformation processes – were close to those I practice. Obviously, their intensity, their urgency, gives them an exceptional character. The Jury’s choices gradually moved towards projects based upon process, rather than objects (even though these were sometimes spectacular). This obviously relates to the particularities of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, but probably also marks a turning point in history. A sense of seriousness, a desire for authenticity and legitimacy dominates. Thus, all the awarded projects are deep-rooted in a specific social and cultural context, and have a strong and readable consistency. Critical debates have focused on these specific values that belong to the essence of architecture. Many of the topics we discussed are contemporary landscape issues, and I would like to put these issues into perspective here.

A large number of cities are adopting territorial projects and visions. These projects anticipate the future and extend beyond any administrative limits, often merging with those of natural geography. I believe this is something more than a simple momentary preoccupation. In some countries (for example France), a deficit of projects is giving way to planning on a large scale and sometimes over long periods. Everything suggests that a lack of financial resources is discouraging the production of icons in favour of territorial, collective and sustainable projects. The desire to construct is shifting its focus from the spectacular object towards more modest prototypes of territorial schemes. These modest but heartening undertakings give me a sense of optimism.

These preconditions, sometimes considered temporary and often drawn up with the urgency imposed by an impending election, are conceived with a sort of detachment. Paradoxically, such precarious conditions can result in lasting works of architecture, since they are detached from any notion of statecraft and above all their modesty allows for any kind of future transformation. It is in this sense that they can last. I believe in the potential of the recomposition of the geography of our urban territories. I believe in the creation of public spaces that are lacking at the scale of the major urban expansions. An urban culture on a large scale is taking shape. I am delighted about this situation, in which society seems ready to tackle the transformation of its territories.

Several of our projects of territorial recomposition have prompted us to re-examine the park system that had been initiated by Frederick Law Olmsted in the United States in the 19th century. This system is founded on a rigorous identification of geographical structures: a river in Boston, former stream beds turned into open sewers in Washington DC. Olmsted’s work consisted in amplifying the presence of these natural elements – plentiful planting on the reliefs, water management, installation of infrastructure, traffic routes – in ways that would create robust foundations for the development of the city. Some of the park systems conceived in this way, such as the one in Boston, remain legible and still preserve all their meaning today. If this set of parks forms a coherent and intelligent whole, it is because it is based on a natural geography, on a very large scale. In the city, this geography is completed, transposed by artificial elements. These elements are minor on the geographical scale, which preserves its coherence, but are immense on the scale of Boston’s new districts, giving them structure. Thus, looking at the landscape of the 19th century, it does not seem illusory to me to propose “amplified” modes of management of landscape, within a period of time of about 50 years, in order to provide a geographical anchorage for fragmented urban territories.

The territories on which we – landscape architects and city planners – are called to act pose multiple and complex problems, sometimes on a very large scale. Hence, we experience difficulty in seeing, understanding, measuring and arbitrating. Perceiving urban phenomena of large dimensions is, in fact, arduous. Everyone creates their own mental image, an abstraction that obscures the reality. Thus the maps of a large territory are rarely the expression of a physical reality. Which city in what territory? What kind of boundaries? What is being measured? These are similar questions to those that scientists ask on a cellular scale. Comparing our approach to some of their works, concerning equally complex phenomena, makes us aware of our fragility and of the risk of becoming content with symbolic, ideological, even commercial approaches, as well as our distance from real environmental problems. Perceiving the scale and having the right response at the right dimension is, in my view, the key to the success of a recomposition of a territory.

In methodological terms, a permanent gauging is needed, like the systematic adjustments made on old reflex cameras before taking a picture. Gauging obliges us to tackle all scales at once: implementing a strategy of organisation over the long term, looking at things on smaller scales (of the order of 250 hectares) for places in which pieces of city are actually going to be built, and carrying out concrete experiments on even smaller scales (10 or so hectares). This simultaneity of work on varying scales forces us to keep adjusting our gaze so that each new point of view explains or questions the previous one, and permits the evaluation of hypotheses formulated for future development.
Adjusting the gaze and evaluating the intervention are indispensable for avoiding fixed notions of development of territories that are prevalent today. In fact, this is the basis of the first phase of many projects that are constructed around the globe without due acknowledgement or awareness of their future development. I have finally ended up with a picture of contemporary city planning as the addition of the “first phases” of developments that will never exist, and that may constitute conceptual errors. In order to remedy this, it is our job and our duty to conceive intelligent “wholes”, while giving them constants, intangible and lasting elements with which it is possible to work on the transformation of territories.

Many projects recognised by the Award contribute to the transformation of cities and territories that have already been greatly modified and rendered artificial. This is particularly so as a consequence of addressing built environments dating from the second half of the 20th century. During the 20th century, many cities were developed without any awareness of the totality of the building mass and without creating public spaces on a par with the scale of the urbanisation produced.

Now it is a question of repairing, transforming and reinstating spaces and territories that are already inhabited and occupied. The urgent need is to get the proportion between landscape and built-up areas into balance again. History teaches us that 30% of a balanced territory is open space, a ratio whose legitimacy it is difficult to get developers to accept today. So every city proceeds by successive repairs or small additions – a series of projects of transformation that are carried out over a long period. Around 30 years is needed to create a new district. Over such a long timescale, the landscape is transformed through layers. It is not the fixed anticipation of a project. Each layer is new and transforms the previous one.

Returning to an earlier layer, one finds that things did not go according to plan, no more so in a park than in an urban context. Fortunately, the master plan is never translated into reality in the way that was intended. So our view of our first physical interventions has to be modified. It is necessary to select, to create a hierarchy. The first layer is decisive, but leaves room for numerous possibilities, adaptations and adjustments. Subjected to a process of this kind, these places may seem unfinished. This idea of incompleteness may pertain to a desire for coherence, the desire to transform territories in step with what is constructed, with the practices that are adopted. Incompleteness also allows you to remain open to developments and to differentiated appropriations. So I consider these spaces subject to successive transformations as “intermediate natures”, flexible ones, capable of playing on duration and temporality.

Being a landscape architect means contributing to the building of a common territory. A public space in an urban centre is undoubtedly the most visible of these common heritages, the one that bestows identity on a district or a city. In European cities, public spaces assume configurations that are always specific and put up stiff resistance to standardisation and globalisation. Some of the projects reviewed (especially the Altach Islamic Cemetery, Austria, by Bernardo Bader, and the Rabat-Salé Urban Infrastructure Project, Morocco, by Marc Mimram) were very close to landscape projects – not gardens as such, but similar to territorial approaches. This gives me much pleasure, especially as I understand that the Aga Khan Award for Architecture will take an ever-increasing interest in these approaches.