

empty spaces

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First story: a couple of years ago, I was climbing with some friends. I organised this trip, but I made a mistake, a terrible mistake. I didn't look at the climbing-map and so I didn't see that there was a lift on the other side of the mountain. After a few hours of hard climbing we arrived at the top, but there were a lot of people already there: a group of tourists; a group of old people and their grandchildren. At the top we didn't find any solitude, any silence, any freedom. It was exactly the opposite, very crowded and noisy. As we took our break, I realised that this group of tourists made a lot of pictures of the panorama. Afterwards they bought postcards of the same »landscape«. I don't know how often this place has been photographed a hundred, a thousand or a million times – everything is already photographed, but not by everyone – somehow crazy, isn't it? I want to tell more stories, maybe some personal stories, stories about our landscape and about our city, stories about something that is invisible, about the »non-perception « of something that is probably known to everybody, stories about the spaces between the buildings, stories about... how should I call it? – the »non-spaces« or the »empty spaces«.

Aesthetics and Ecology

Before I write about these »empty spaces« I want to address perception of a completely particular form of space, namely the »landscape«. Maybe, it is helpful to first clarify the term landscape and how we perceive that space. Because sometimes, some friends tell me that they were on holiday in a place where there were no tourists. They got along perfectly with the natives because they were still completely untainted. An added advantage is that this natives sell local souvenirs, real handicrafts for an incredibly low price. Therefore these happy human beings didn't even need any money and they are able to live in a cheap way – and now there comes the crucial sentence – in this »intact landscape« This kind of tourist has the crazy idea that the landscape is natural and intact as long as only the natives cultivate it and it only starts being destructed when colonialists or tourists arrive. Of course, except this tourist who got along so well with these natives because he describes himself as a »soft tourist« – sometimes I think that it is no coincidence that tourist and terrorist sounds so similar. But what is then landscape? Is landscape the environment and its cultivating farmers? Is it urbanisation, industry and tourism that disturbs this landscape? This makes no sense because industry and industrial population also belong to the landscape even if not a single conifer grows anymore in industrial areas because of pollution and if only birch tree can survive. Or exactly therefore, a »typical landscape« can be characterized as such because a particular vegetation has developed there. For example: one could cite the »typical landscape« of Bitterfeld which the Time Magazine identified as the dirtiest city of Europe. Bitterfeld is a town and the name of a region in the eastern part of Germany, precisely between Leipzig and Berlin. The term Bitterfeld, is also a synonym for 100 years of chemical industry and open-cast coal mining. The German reunification in 1989 destroyed the whole industry there. Ten thousand people lost their jobs. Now, ten years later, a fantastic and unique landscape developed with plants that scientists thought were extinct and animals like the beaver, which dam up the old open-cast mines. Today there is a heterotopy of nature reserve, of an old and completely contaminated chemical area and new established chemical industry. However there is a confusion, because this newly developed nature needs human beings, to pump up the ground water for the open-cast mines. And today there are some people, who have a strange idea to artificially restore this

»typical landscape« of Bitterfeld, they want to transform it into the landscape they imagine, the landscape which existed 100 years ago, and of course include some new ideas like lakes, boathouses, beaches and a golf course. And what happens with this »typical landscape« of Bitterfeld? Is this landscape not also to be protected, or is this the famous question: What was first, the chicken or the egg? Or like Lucius Burckardt, in his book »Design = Unsichtbar«: »What comes first: the individual – or the main concept? All the plants, animals, stones, mountains, clouds – or the landscape? Landscape is therefore a term that leans not on ecology but on aesthetics, it is a construct of perception«. The perception of tourists – of all of us, the city dwellers, can't see the environment or classify it without the term landscape, but also not without the term city. Seeing alone isn't enough for perception. A baby can also see but he/she learns step by step to perceive, to choose the significant things from thousands of impressions. The baby discovers food, possible games, possible obstacles. The agricultural working man also has such a selective perception: here is a ripe fruit, there not yet; here is good ground, there is lean ground, the potatoes of the neighbour are again bigger than mine, but my corn stands better. His perception is based on interest. We city dwellers have no interest in these problems, we are tourists in the countryside. We look for that landscape the imagination promised from highly polished printed brochures. The landscape that poets and painters have described throughout our cultural history, preformed and visually burned in our heads. This »Intact landscape«, we looking for is therefore an imaginary image, which we can buy on postcards and which we want to see and photograph. A logical consequence is the idea »Back to the nature«, this attempt to restore this imaginary image artificially.

Empty spaces

As child I have always played in such »empty spaces«. Everyone has. These places are gaps between buildings and land for building, ruins of buildings, but also fallow land, no longer used industrial areas, gravel pits and sand mines. These places are formed through miss-planning and speculations were our empire, the empire of children. I can remember very well one of these »playgrounds«. It was not far from the apartment of my parents, maybe as far as I can throw a stone. It was not very big, »soccer-field-big«, but it was our own empire, with our own laws – the laws of children. This place served also as a short cut to school, this was often the reason for being to late in school or at home – well, one had allways something to do there. Actually we were not allowed to play there but no one was able to inspect this area from outside. It was a place adults would be reluctant to enter, such a place, such a dirty, unused place, with all sorts of pests like snakes, lizards, insects of every category and with unappealing, growing vegetation. And on the border there was illegal rubbish deposited so that there was only one way to enter, a footpath, – by that way, I love footpaths because they are human ways that have something mysterious, almost romantic and they can tell stories. Our »empty space« also had a small brook, I remember well that we always tried to dam up this brook because we had the idea of making our own swimming pool. But we never succeeded despite perfect planning and nearly professional technical drawings, there was a jinx on it. In the summer we built cottages that mostly didn't survive the winter and in the winter we built snow-castles. We played with »geliehener Authentizität« (make believe) cowboy and Indians, Robin Hood and even Robinson Crusoe. There was snowball fights with bloody noses and the first romantic kisses... and then... Suddenly, there was this fence, a huge fence, a building site fence, made out of planks, opaque, impenetrable. They came with excavators and builders,

to build a place of community and communication. They built a church with a youth-club. This wasn't all so bad, if there hadn't have appeared, by the end of the construction, this special type of a human being. There came – what is called – »landscape-designers«, »city-gardeners«? No, these names are too kind. Instead they should be named: »terminators of all life« or »killers of the empty spaces«. They not only exterminated our playground, our footpath, our short cut and transformed it into a monotonous green meadow, but, they had also diverted our brook and replaced it with a fountain, a fountain of cubical forms of concrete, in different sizes that should symbolise »being together«. I still don't understand that. My mother told me: »...is so called art«. This story of my »empty space« is not an isolated case. There are many examples. The reason why I remembered it and started to think about it, has something to do with Leipzig and with my having moved there in 1992. During the second World War and the years of East Germany, a lot of such »empty spaces« have appeared. At some of these places, you can still even see the traces of the War. At first they were not perceptible until the city of Leipzig started for some inexplicable reasons to build fences and started »landscaping«.

Vegetation is Information

The problem with this development is the destruction of the information of the landscape. Children understand the language of the »natural vegetation«. They can read the vegetation, if they can play undisturbed, climb over the fence, make a small fire, or if an annoyed owner immediately claims the terrain for himself. With the help of dandelion and buttercup, chicory and stinging nettles. Each city needs places without laws from outside. Such »empty spaces« have completely their own laws. Vegetation is information. Gardening is the ordering of vegetation, by making the responsibility, the property-situations invisible and consequently the destruction of Information. The city-gardener fights against such information producing weeds. They operate with flowers and with lawns in a manner as if they have to imitate modern agriculture: they maximise the profits with the same methods as the farmer (e.g. fertilise) but then they throw the profits away unused. Missplanning and speculation, especially at the outskirts, will always create new empty spaces and areas with spontaneous vegetation. There are ruins of buildings, land for building that is advertised as terrain that still has no owner, and speculative overestimated properties that lie around unsold. It is therefore not bizarre to claim that »natural nature« temporarily needs these »empty spaces« to survive. This spontaneous vegetation, the so called weed, is a biological reserve with which we can later populate the destroyed agricultural areas. Crazy, but if you think about it, these missplannings and speculations contribute to the actual protection of nature. But then... Then they come again... these city-gardener, these »Eliminators of the Mystery«, these »Killers of empty spaces«. They declare everything dirty; they mow, pave and plant in zones where children and teenagers played before. Paradoxically, they made sometimes also playgrounds, but planned and standardized playgrounds. Sandboxes with benches for the parents, new plant shadow giving trees for the old people and streetball-places for the teenagers and around all them is a green grass. These landscape-designers have this idea that »gardening« and the utilisation of these »empty spaces« will make their city appear greener and more attractive. And furthermore, this »beautiful« green will not be destroyed by use, they pave the paths and put up signs saying: »no entrance!«. In this case naturalness seems to be understood as »unused-ness«: an unending green of grass and roses, always jammed in similar pots of cement and framed with absolutely straight paved paths, tarred without any fantasy or mystery. This destruction of

information demonstrates a movement that has been moving through the villages of Germany for years. It is called: »Unser Dorf soll schöner werden – Our village should be nicer«. The beautification of these villages happen by check-lists; that means that specifics disappear and universalities are generated. A jury knows exactly how a beautiful village looks: The fountain of the village is incapacitated, begonias and geraniums are planted in its basin, around the fountain there is grass where two benches are placed. The grass is so perfect that no footpath leads to the benches; the villagers and the random visitors don't risk sitting on these benches because they give the impression of the »unused-ness«. Footpaths are not allowed at all: The children can't read the information in this terrain, they don't know if it is allowed or forbidden to enter the grass field; so it is better not to enter, of course only as long as adults are watching. Naturalness here is understood as the annihilation of human traces through perfect gardening. Landscape, now not in the sense of our tourist but in the context of urban space, leans not on ecology but on aesthetics. It is therefore not a miracle how we handle, practice and operate with the idea of »public space« today.

The point of view

Sometimes one could suppose, that city-planners or these city-gardeners simply try to alleviate their boredom by taking a map to search for useless »empty spaces«. The perspective that the map offers gives them the feeling of power and control. As giants from fairy-tales they hover over their city and with their mighty paw show the empty blots. From the bird's-eye view they work on their image of the town. They discover with the topography, that one could beautify a crossroad with a couple of flowers, that one could make this white blot on the map »greener« or that there is still some space for a couple of benches. It doesn't matter, if 3 meters away is a very noisy main street or 100 meters away there is a loud fabric. For the reality at eye-level, the city-planners have no interest, the main point is that the map includes more green.

Uniformity

In our metropolises how can we make it perceptible that there is still something like nature? The Landscape-designer, the city-gardeners and the city-planner want to save the image of the landscape and nature, that's why they plant traffic-zoning-green in between the highways, the street refuge and roundabouts all the routes into the city, throughout the pedestrian-zone and into the town hall, through the theater and into the corridors of the hospital. They always present any kind of exotic leaf-plants in similar cement-pots. Each free space in the city, which isn't used by the car, will be transformed from the city-gardener in a green island. This »defragmentation« of the green has an effect that we no longer perceive this green and we have the feeling that the city becomes more and more unnatural and stony. Nature as such is invisible; it will be perceived only in its presentation. Therefore the perception of landscape is based on the contrast between city and landscape – »I can't see the wood for the trees«. However such a complete separation of landscape and city doesn't exist anymore in our time. We live in metropolises, which is a mix of city-fragments and landscapefragments in endless sequences. A clash of urban systems like public places, shopping malls, parks, industry-areas, residential-areas, leisure centers and in between and all over the green, respectively the landscape of the city-gardeners. Today, however there exists a uniformity of these fragments and therefore of the city. For example, the same city-furniture of JCDecaux is placed all over Europe, and even worse, vegetation is no longer allowed to have specification or spontaneity.

Green is only perceptible if it is discussed visually, and if it makes the problem of its threat visible. A city should be a well insinuated composition of these fragments, of this contrast between city and countryside, between natural nature and our image of landscape, between global and local, between public spaces and private spaces, between parks and "empty spaces". Apropos »empty spaces«, I am not so sure anymore, if »empty space« is really the right term!