

Using landscape to imagine a “post-carbon” land

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Planning the city of tomorrow that can adapt to predictable changes means thinking about land differently. A global vision built around landscape could be one of the keys to building a land for a “post-carbon” society. How can we envisage a sustainable city-nature alliance, manifested through the landscape and designed as the cornerstone of human settlements? Let us look at the Garden of Two Banks in Strasbourg, a first experimental project.

The model for urban development that has persisted over the last forty years has been called into question. At a time of major change in climate and ways of life, the question of a post-carbon land has come to the fore. It is a question that deals not just with the availability of energy resources but how we utilise our land. It also covers social cohesion problems and economic dynamics.

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The natural foundation: a key component of a sustainable land

By using the natural foundation, landscape allows us to see land differently. It has the advantage of shifting questions regarding water, climate, agriculture, nature in cities, back to the forefront of analysis and debate. It is closely tied to the notion of an area’s permanence, in contrast to a constantly-changing, disoriented urban fabric. It reinforces the identity and individual nature of the land, a factor in its appeal and a driver of economic and social development. Globalisation, on the other hand, belittles the land, and utilising technology creates a distance from the natural foundation. Finally, landscape creates a link with the senses and this is vital in promoting togetherness.

Building the city-nature alliance

Optimising natural resources (water, soil, biodiversity, energy, etc.), tackling global warming, preserving farmland, offering healthier food by promoting local produce, meeting the city’s needs in terms of nature, force us to rethink how we utilise the land as part of a new city-nature relationship.

The green networks could be the basis for the area’s new infrastructure, tied to the water that is a widespread feature of the Rhine Valley. The water forms a natural reservoir with a substantial water table and has given rise to a host of natural spaces, as well as a dense surface network of streams and rivers. It is a unifying feature that links the urban, cultivated and natural spaces. Through the valleys, the water teaches us about every aspect of the land, at the city level as well as at local level. Water gives the Rhine back its status of major artery. It builds a shared identity among the various built-up areas (cities, towns, villages)

and ways of life. It offers a connection with the senses, which feed the imagination and develop a proximity to nature much sought after in towns and cities.

If the green and blue network is to be the main driver of this new city-nature relationship, it is essential to preserve and develop the framework of not just natural but also farming spaces. This network must also be given a shape and its interface with built-up spaces must be organised; it must be made accessible and new uses must be developed there. Its organisation into a system would allow it to integrate the wide range of functions it represents (biodiversity, risk management, transport, breathing space, attractiveness, functions relating to climate, society and recreation), thereby meeting the many goals of local authorities and the expectations of residents.

Forging links using the public space and mobility

As the city-nature relationship evolves, networking the various parts of the region and mobility (including the active modes: pedestrian and bicycle journeys) are essential ingredients with particular resonance in the current socio-economic context. Given the increase in transport costs, the constraints on the public finances to develop and manage heavy infrastructure networks, public health issues, the need to reduce greenhouse gases, the desire for better quality of life emphasising nature and recreation, our relationship with the land must be re-examined to achieve greater proximity and intensity.

Criss-crossing the city and nearby suburbs with the active modes of the green and blue network achieves more than just a networking effect. It brings nature into the city thanks to a network of tree-lined cycle paths, which promote biodiversity. It weaves new links with natural and farming spaces, and a new type of

proximity that creates attractive spaces not just in centres but also in the in-between space.

This networking also operates on the social and economic level, as well as on the mental representation of the land, by expressing these new links in the life centres, the local places and services, and by making the specific characteristics of the landscape apparent.

A new city-nature relationship that re-examines the urban outline

Given the changes emerging in society that recast urban issues around sustainable development, the question arises of what kind of urban morphology will reflect this dynamic. Using the network of natural spaces as a framework for a new urban layout, designing the land through its (natural but also urban) empty spaces as a starting point rather than the built-up spaces, invites to change the view and to re-examine the resulting urban outline. How apparent is the natural foundation, what kind of scenography of the built-up space is drawn when we employ this new green and blue framework?

Weaving the built-up space into the natural foundation involves taking the city back to water, creating transition areas that benefit the city and nature equally and that showcase a new city that is attractive and dynamic. This also implies greater density along the green networks, locating municipal facilities there and imagining an architectural and urban form that addresses these new concerns.

The Garden of Two Banks: a first step in

changing the relationship with the natural foundation and with the Rhine

By changing our view of a marginalised district into an attractive one, the Garden of Two Banks² has played a pivotal role in transforming an entire area of the city. With the development of the Strasbourg-Kehl corridor, on either side of the Route du Rhin (RN4), we are today witnessing the urban restoration of an entire city sector, combining municipal facilities, local shops and housing around public spaces tied to water.

In keeping with the vision of building the development of tomorrow, the Garden of Two Banks represents one of the first steps in this new city-nature relationship. With its cross-border presence on either side of the Rhine, it has represented a new reference point in the Strasbourg landscape. This first manifestation of the city returning to the Rhine lent a whole new identity to the river, imprinting it once more into the collective psyche and allowing it to be a showcase for a new living space.

It is the garden that links the river to the city and not the road network or built-up space. By placing the Rhine back at the heart of this Franco-German region, the nature of the river changed and became a place of interaction and coming together, as symbolised by the footbridge over the Rhine designed by architect Marc Mimram.

In addition to its cross-border connection that defines the Strasbourg-Kehl corridor, the Garden of Two Banks also represents the first milestone in the construction of a euro-regional link. This window onto the Rhine binds the city of Strasbourg to Europe, the North Sea and the Alps. A broad horizon called to mind by the endless comings and goings of countless voyages along this river.

² The Garden of Two Banks is a cross-border project resulting from the art and landscape festival (*Landesgartenschau*) developed jointly by the cities of Strasbourg and Kehl between 1998 and 2004. Following a European competition won by Rüdiger Brosk, a German landscape architect, the development of the Garden of Two Banks over around fifty hectares became the headline project of the Strasbourg-Kehl corridor.