

THE GARDEN AND THE LAYERED LANDSCAPES: LANDSCAPE URBANISM THROUGH THE LENS OF GARDEN DESIGN

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, also landscape architects and urban designers have learnt to think big—in large scales and far-reaching visions. Landscape is called upon as the model and the medium of urbanism, feeding into a grand narrative of saving the day when architecture as the ordering principle of the city has become obsolete or inadequate. The horizontality, large scale organisational techniques, and landscape processes associated with landscape are called upon to provide a new understanding of urbanism, able to solve the problems where the classical architectural repertoire falls short. (Waldheim 2016, p. 3; Corner 2006, p. 23) Understanding the fluid or changing nature of any environment and the processes that effect change over time, landscape urbanism is concerned with a working surface over time—a type of urbanism that anticipates change, openendedness and negotiation. This suggests shifting attention from the object qualities of spaces to the systems that condition the distribution and density of urban form. In this vision however, landscape is indeed the carrier of urban developments but has no independent formal status. (Steenbergen and Reh 2011, pp. 428-430)

On the other hand, we can observe tendencies to think small again: design interventions on the neighbourhood level, transformations of unused spaces through low-cost, bottom-up actions, awareness rising and community building projects that shape space temporarily. Unfortunately, the tendency to involve users and actors in the design, is associated with a crumbling attention to spatial design and the associated notions of place, space, and form.

Space does not emerge naturally when social and landscape processes and a sustainable programme are addressed, so aren't we thus letting go of the specific spatial and experiential qualities of the landscape and of the architectonic culture in which these landscape qualities can manifest and develop? Of the associated notions of place, space, and form that a *landscape architectural* lens, rather than a *landscape* lens, could provide?

The garden has always been a place where urbanism, architecture and landscape are seamlessly intertwined. It is also a small and defined object with a formal, spatial design, which does not appear to deserve a place in the definition of landscape urbanism. If we were to give it a place, what could that be, and what can landscape urbanism learn from the design of gardens?

METHOD

Rather than viewing landscape urbanism as a new member in the growing and hybridizing family of design disciplines, it might be helpful to realize that in essence urbanism already is nothing more than a new layer of the already layered landscape; urbanism based on landscape principles is from all times. (Steenbergen 2008, pp. 114-115; Van der Velde and De Wit 2010) In the following section I will unravel these different landscape layers, with the layer of the urban developments (either designed or naturally evolved) as one of them. Gardens are reflections of these different layers of landscape, regardless the urbanity or non-urbanity of their context, and as such have the ability to make connections and catalyse new developments. (Hunt 2000; De Wit 2014)

A striking example is the quadrangle of St. Catherine's College (1960) in Oxford by Arne Jacobsen, transferring a traditional Oxford courtyard type to the open landscape of the river meadows. The garden connects the different functions—changing over time—within the college, as well as in the city and the fields. And it reflects the different layers—natural, cultural and urban—that characterize the development of the Oxford urban landscape.

LAYERED LANDSCAPE

The change from a city in the landscape to the city as a landscape is generally considered a contemporary development. However, in its essence urbanism already is nothing more than a new layer of the already layered landscape.

The landscape can be considered a dynamic system, continuously transforming under the influence of societal needs and demands. These transformations create a stratification of different formal systems: the natural, cultural, urban and architectural landscape. The physical appearance of a given location is never the result of only the last transformation, but shows traces of the ones before; it is an accumulation of systems or treatments that have piled up and acted upon one another over time.

This stratification steps off from the natural landscape. We can imagine its form as being built up from a number of “basic forms” whose physical appearance is defined by the relative strengths of land, water and wind. This natural landscape is also as the raw material for the process of cultivation, which created the second layer: the cultural landscape. The configuration of different forms of reclamation is the result of the interaction between the existing natural form and the efficiency of geometrical patterns resulting from the technical logic of cultivation, irrigation and drainage. (De Wit 2003, p. 112) The natural and the cultural landscape form a close-knitted unity, constituting what is generally considered as “the landscape”. Here the qualities of the landscape, the natural processes, the *longue durée* of evolution and natural growth, silence, emptiness and the horizon are apparent.

In every garden, however conscious or explicit, aspects of both the natural and the cultural landscape are expressed. This is aptly represented in the diagrammatic drawing that was used as the frontispiece to Abbé Pierre le Lorrain de Vallemont's widely published book *Curiositez de la Nature et de l'Art (Curiosities of Art and Nature in Husbandry and Gardening)* (1705). Here agricultural fields succeed the garden, and the view is terminated with wilderness: a lumpish hillside from the bottom of which gushes a natural spring. In the other direction—back towards the viewer—the sequence is similar: first the ordered garden, then a grove of regularly planted trees, then wasteland. (Hunt 200, p. 33) (Figure 1)

In these interpretations the natural and the cultural landscape are described as the two layers constituting the landscape that was reflected in the garden. However, the art of gardens as it was understood has a broad scope, constituting art as well as labour and technique. Art, labour and technique can be argued to be expressed in the urban landscape—which for its part arose out of a civil engineering process enacted on both natural and cultural landscapes, and is composed of

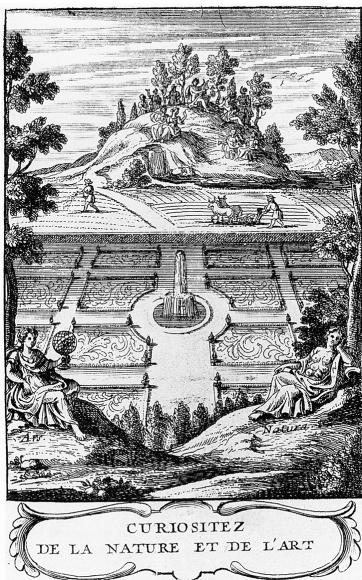


FIGURE 1. The garden reflecting the natural and the cultural landscape, with the goddesses in the foreground representing art and nature respectively.
Frontispiece *Curiositez de la Nature et de l'Art* (Drawing by l'Abbé de Vallemont, 1705)

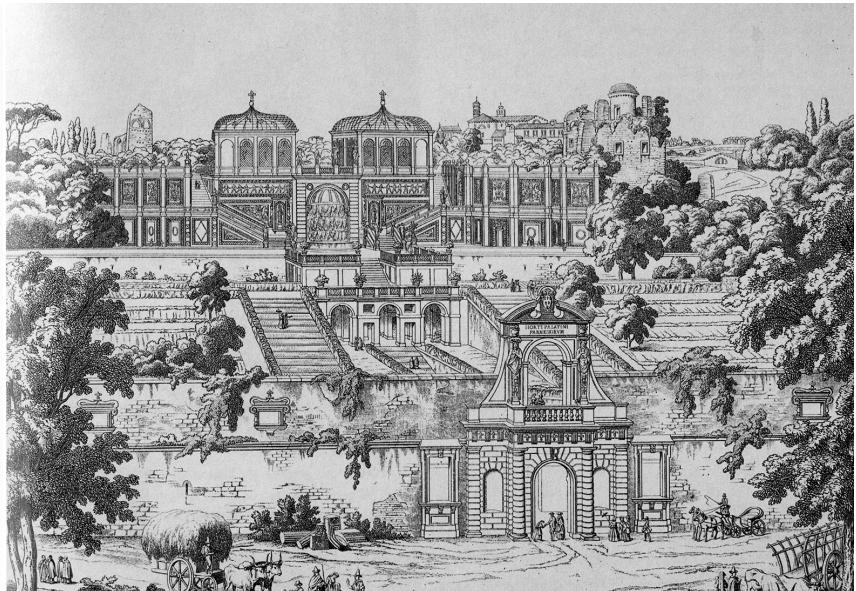


FIGURE 2. The garden reflecting the urban landscape: entrance of the *Orti Farnesiani* (1556) seen from the *Campo Vaccino* (Drawing by P. Letarouilly, 1853).

cooperating urban elements, connected by a transport network. Thus landscape comprises the urban landscape as well, forming a third layer. Urban programmes for dwelling, work, leisure and transportation lay down rules for the physical environment, as a reflection of the internal logic of flows of vehicles, money and information, the technical and durable network of underground infrastructure, the relation between public and private and the ruling views of power, justice and culture. As Arnold Berleant (1997) has observed, the built environment is not necessarily opposed to countryside or wilderness. The city is a particular environment, made from materials obtained or derived from the natural world and with the same perceptual elements as other environments. An urban environment is an integral part of the geography of its region, from which it usually has no sharp boundaries and with which it has a reciprocal relationship (p. 33).

Already in the Renaissance, when the theory of the garden representing the two natures was developed, the interplay between architecture and landscape was included in the city, where the repertoire of the garden was converted into instruments for shaping collective urban spatial forms. The *Orti Farnesiani* in Rome (1556) was transformed in several stages from vegetable gardens into a complex ensemble integrating historical buildings and ruins of the old Rome. (Figure 2) It became an urban garden with a public spatial system, which played an intricate architectonic game with the topography.

Even in the traditional, centralized city, surrounded by open landscape, landscape and city are interacting entities. The contemporary landscape can be considered an overall hybrid of all shades of urbanization, which is not so much a new concept, but a change of emphasis, in which the boundaries have blurred and thickened until they began to take more space than the original counterparts.

ST CATHERINE'S COLLEGE QUADRANGLE

An example of a design that not only reflects the different landscape layers, but plays a role in



FIGURE 3. St. Catherine's College Quadrangle. (Photograph by Sebastiaan Kaal, 2011).

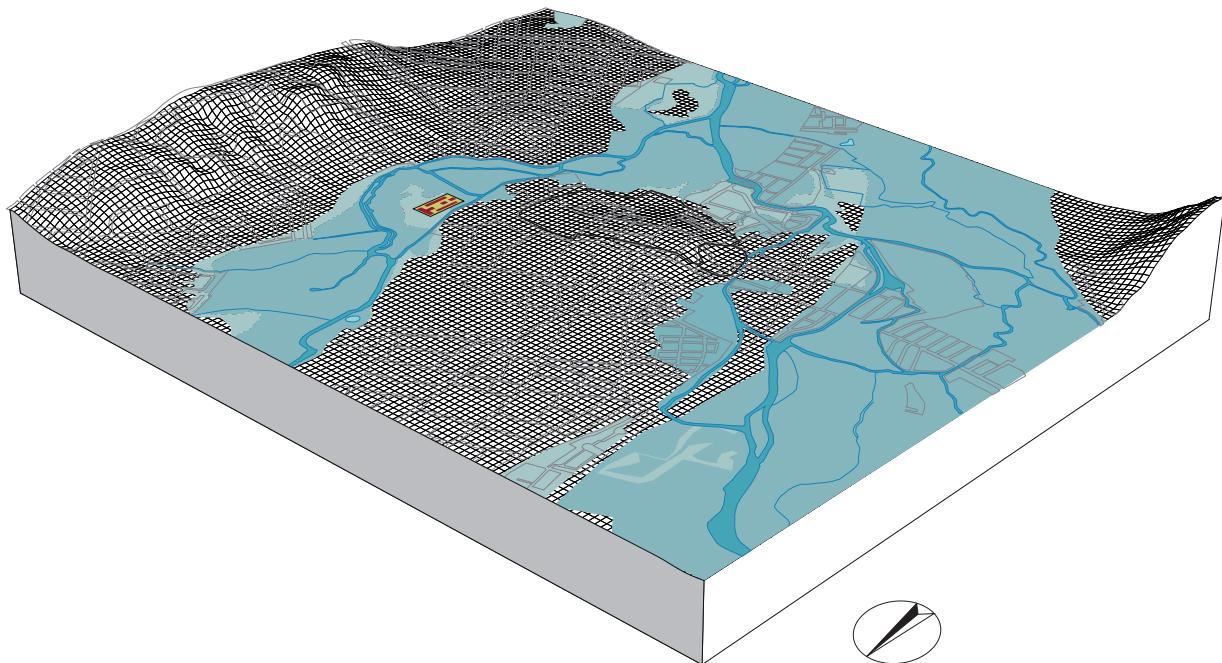


FIGURE 4. St. Catherine's built on an island in floodplain and elevated on plateau: urban satellite. (Drawing by Bastiaan Kwast, 2011).

activating the connections between the different spatial forms that constitute the metropolitan landscape, are the gardens of the St. Catherine's College in Oxford. (Figure 3) The college is built on a river island just outside Oxford city centre city, in the floodplains of the River Cherwell. (Figure 4) With his design Arne Jacobsen transposed the urban typology of the college to the open landscape, opening up the spatial composition without corrupting the basic central organisation of the college type.

The Modernist idiom of objects in a spatial continuum—determining the building volumes—is turned around by the use of planting, which creates enclosed spaces. (Fig. 5 and 6) Aided by these spatial determinants the central quadrangle mediates between the dense urban fabric and the wide, but delineated landscape space of the river meadows. It does so by combining spatial characteristics

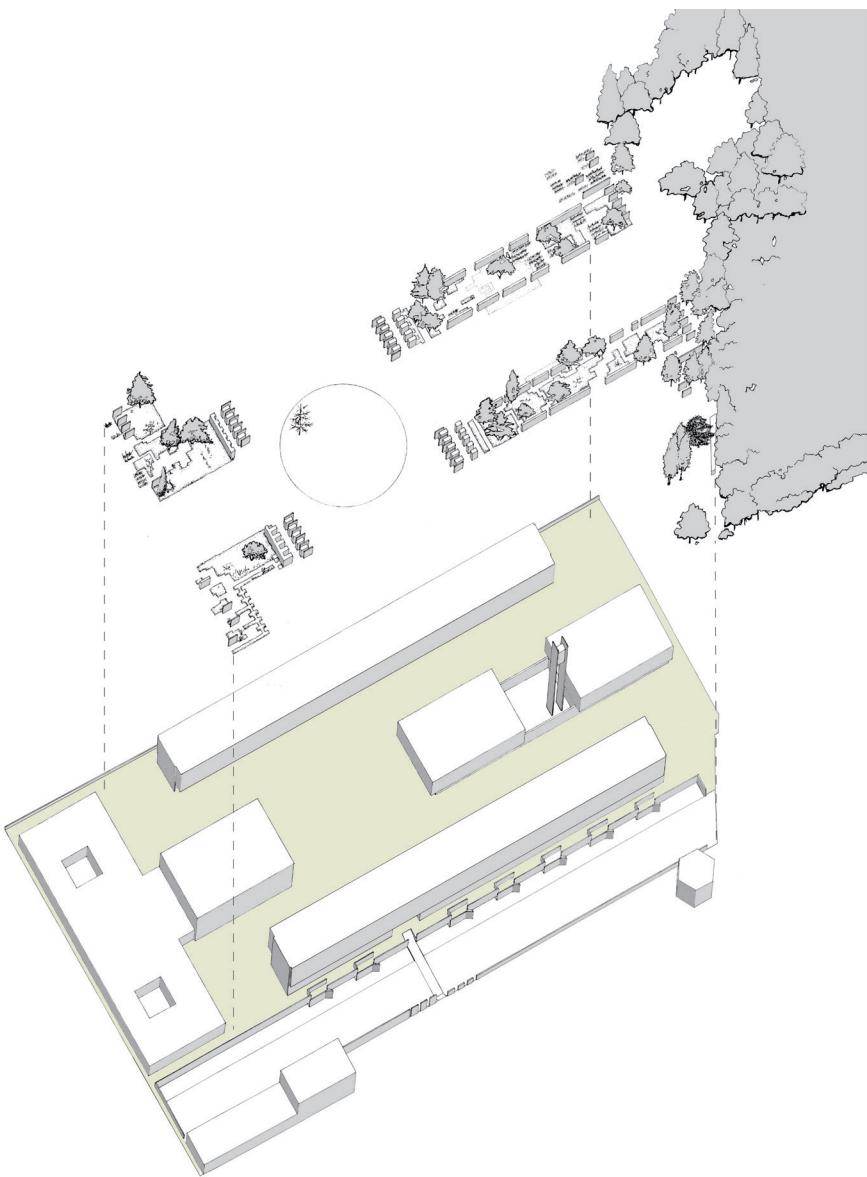


FIGURE 5. The Modernist idiom of objects in a spatial continuum—determining the building volumes—is turned around by the use of planting, which creates enclosed spaces. (Drawing by author, 2013).



FIGURE 6. The planting defines the spaces. (Photograph by Sebastiaan Kaal, 2011).



FIGURE 7. The buildings follow the Modernist idiom of objects in unbounded space. (Photograph by Sebastiaan Kaal, 2011).

of the open river landscape and those of the building type of the college, connecting to the city in typology, connecting to the floodplain in position and composition. The quadrangle is the pivot point, a fixed moment of standstill in between the spatial sequence, linking the college to the city centre, and the outwards oriented organisation of space, relating the college to the meadow. The basic idea of the college as a miniature and to a certain extent controllable society has always been reflected in its form, as an introverted unity, around a strongly defined centre, but affected by the influences of its urban surroundings. St. Catherine's appears to be returning to the ideal form, out in the fields without urban interference. (Fig. 7) The ideal scheme of the monastery—a bounded settlement with its orthogonal configuration of building volumes around a centre—merges with the modern ideal of the city—with separate building volumes free in space. Unaltered by its surroundings it is placed as a “seal” in the curve of the river Cherwell. (Fig. 8) Yet this generic seal gives room to local qualities, never in the foreground, but present throughout: its references

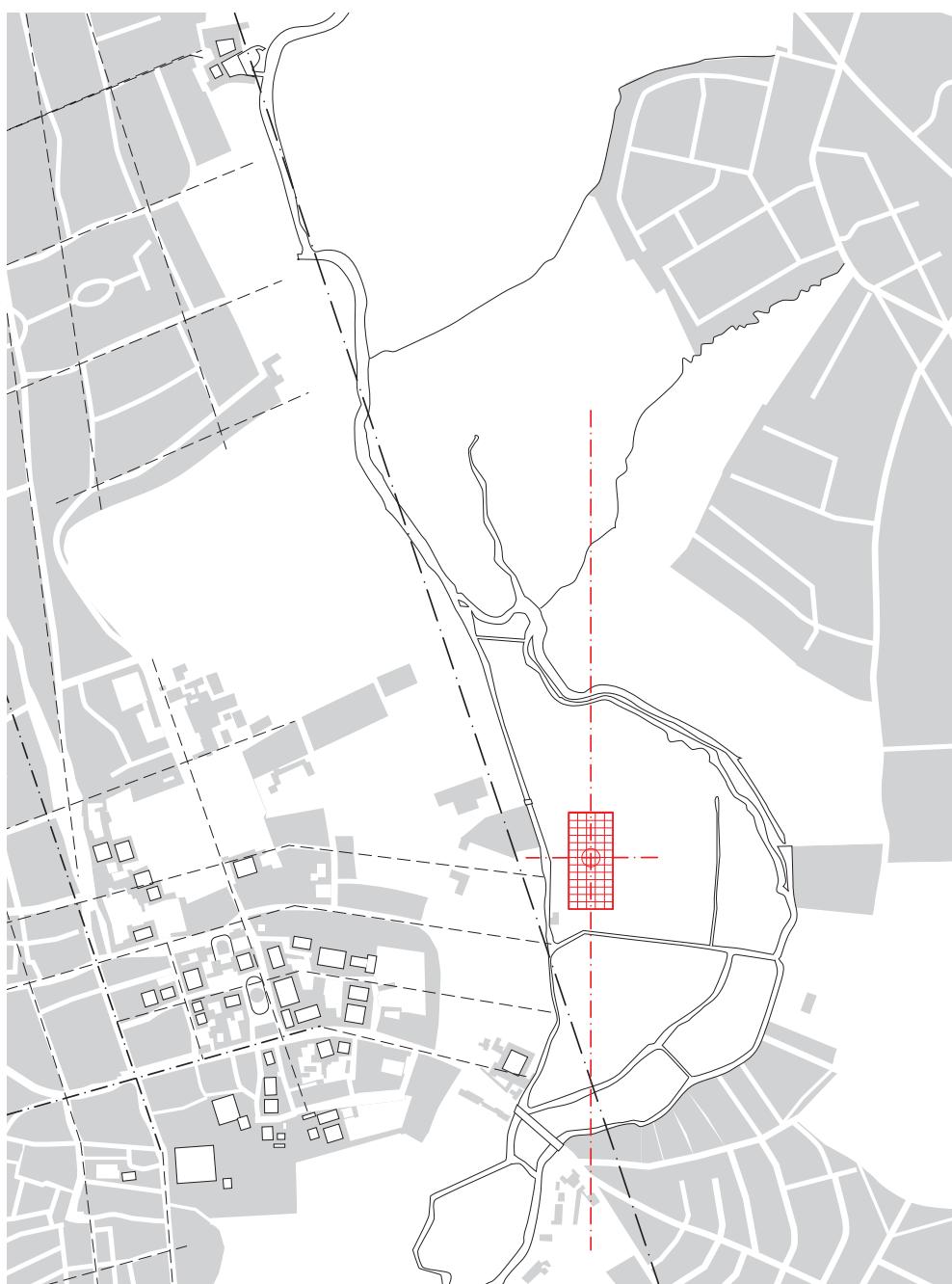


FIGURE 8. The college, built on a plateau following the principal directions, is like a generic ‘seal’ in the landscape. (Drawing by author, 2013).



FIGURE 9. The design reflects both the dense urban fabric and the wide landscape space of the river meadows. (Photographs by Sebastiaan Kaal, 2011).

to Oxford urban forms, its programmatic loyalty to the typical college, its spatial sequences, and its pervading auditory and olfactory stimuli. (Figure 9) The generic seal colonises the landscape as open space within the metropolitan landscape; the local qualities it holds make the generic open landscape the specific open landscape of the Cherwell river meadows.

Although St. Catherine's is situated in the fields, it is the connection to the urban network that is self-evident; the connection to the rural network is informal and almost invisible. While the college is directly bordering the Cherwell, its boathouse, shared with other colleges, sits at the River Thames. Several other college functions—playing fields, chapel and some college flats—are also outside the college, scattered through the city. (Figure 10) This creates a network of college functions specifically used by St. Catherine's residents, overlapping the urban network where the different populations meet. To reach the fields one would need to know where to look. A barely visible footpath that branches off from the entrance road gives access to the fields. It connects to the network of public footpaths, bicycle paths and bridleways that criss-crosses along the Cherwell, an informal and hardly visible, but densely knit connection between the public and private parks, and sports fields. However, visually the fields participate in the urban routing, as an inconspicuous endpoint of the urban routing. The college is like a filter between city and fields. These networks are connected by the quadrangle, which is like the central hallway, the traffic hub of the college. It is a component of the urban programme, and plays a vital role in the obligations and regulations of active daily life. (Figure 11)

DISCUSSION

As a modern design the St. Catherine's quadrangle seems to stand for everything that landscape urbanism does not: trying to contain the dynamic multiplicity of urban processes within a fixed spatial frame. But this fixed spatial frame is programmatically so flexible that it easily connects the different functions—changing over time—with the college, as well as in the city and the fields. It

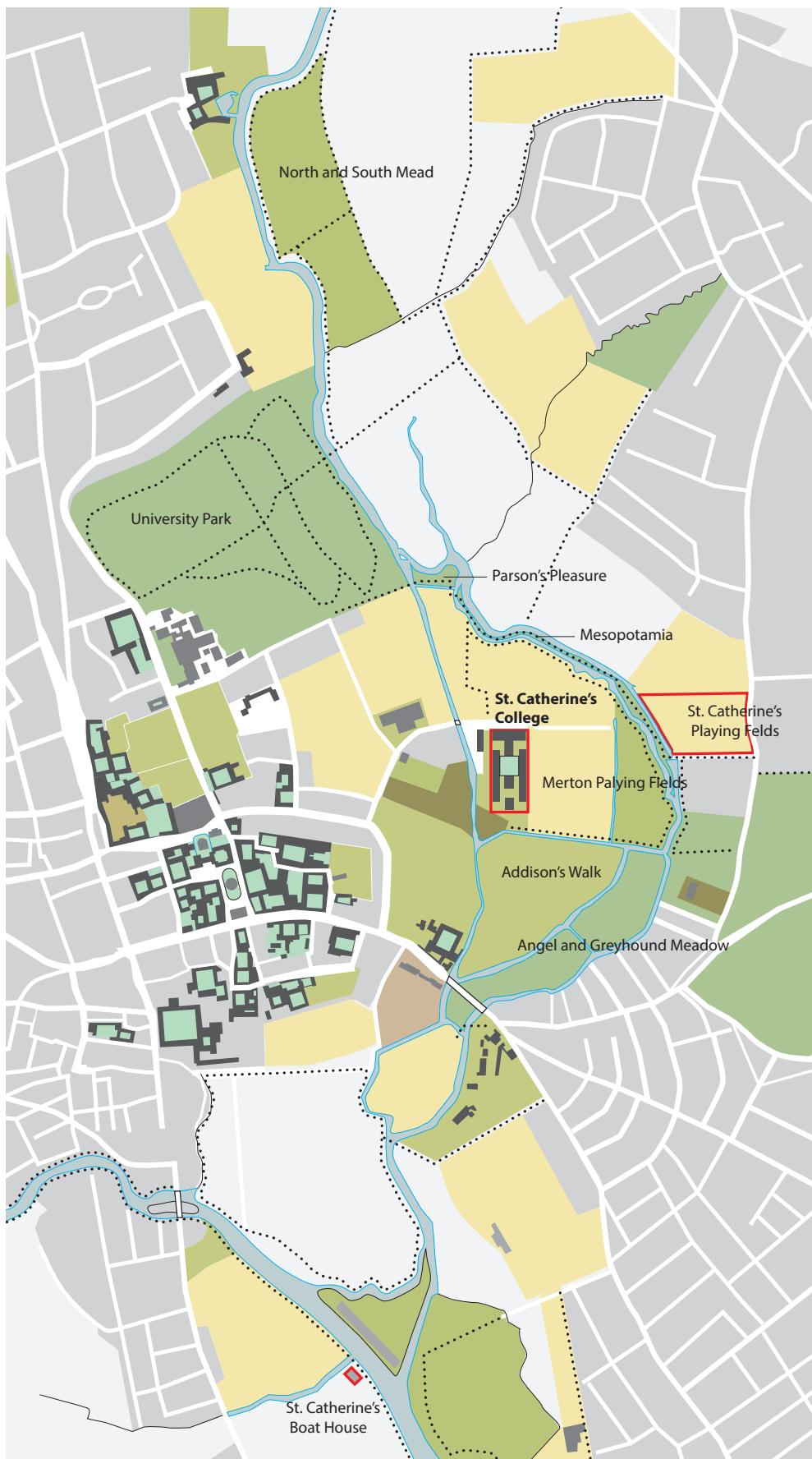


FIGURE 10. The open river meadows hold urban programmes, like sport fields and nature reserves, and college functions are scattered through the city, creating a network of college functions, overlapping the urban network. (Drawing by author, 2013).

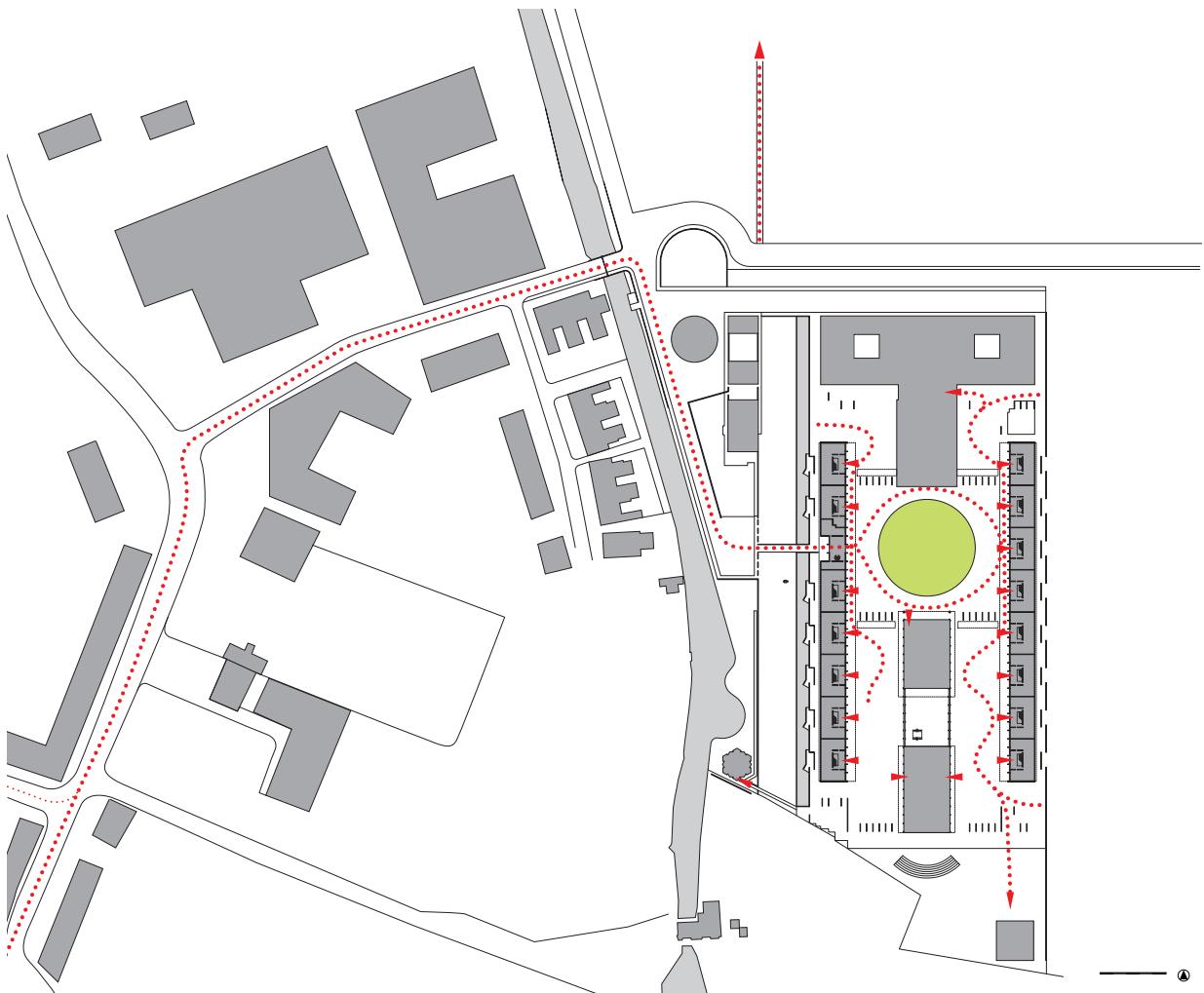


FIGURE 11. The quadrangle is the traffic hub, connecting city, college and meadows. (Drawing by author, 2013).

also reflects the different layers—natural, cultural and urban—that characterize the development of the Oxford urban landscape.

Within a traditional urban-landscape dichotomy there would have been two choices: incorporating the location into the urban fabric or preserving the site as open landscape. Instead, the design equally reflects the urban and the landscape conditions, giving room to local qualities, and highlighting the possibilities of the open landscape as integral part of the urban landscape. On the larger scale the galaxy of quadrangles that defines Oxford serves as model for urbanism, not so much determining the city, but as a layer projected on city centre, outskirts and river meadows, an open-ended pattern stripping away the duality of inside and outside, of city and countryside. (Figure 12) St. Catherine's College Quadrangle shows that such a strategy does not belong exclusively to the urban realm. It uses the tools and images of the landscape to relate to a range of specific conditions.

WHY GARDENS MATTER

To return to where we started: what can the landscape architectural notion of the garden contribute to the discourse of landscape urbanism? The example hints at three different viewpoints.

1. Thinking about the city through the garden. Within the field of landscape urbanism, which is studying the possible relations of landscape and urban developments, the garden could be a lens to understand these (possible) relations, as the discussed design shows: in terms of space and scale, conceptions of nature and the experience of landscape.

Landscape does not have one scale, but is continuous, relational and fluid, connecting all scales. Where landscape urbanism tends to focus on both large scale organisational techniques and horizontal, ecological and infrastructural connections, the garden as a rich and complex three-dimensional space (relying on both horizontal and vertical structuring) exposes the smallest landscape scale and its relations to the surrounding landscape spaces.

Also, where nature traditionally is represented by a pastoral scene opposed to the city, through urban gardens nature can be understood as part of city. Gardens expose nature as an integral part of the urban landscape. This notion has two sides. Firstly, the perceived duality between man and nature is dissolving. Nature is not only wilderness, but also part of everyday life and of the urban landscape. Secondly, nature no longer exists without human influences, is as much artificial as natural.¹ Worldwide, there are more trees in parks, farms and other human environments than in the jungle. A single project for the extraction of tar sands requires as much excavation as all the rivers draining the world of sediment. (Sijmons 2014, p. 13) The garden has always been an artificial—artistic—reflection of nature, now it has become an artificial reflection of nature, which in itself is as much artificial as natural, a version of nature that Malene Hauxner (2010) dubbed “super-natural”.

The nearness of the garden space addresses more senses than just the visual one: tactile experience can only be found when the distance between the observer and the object is close, and the relative speed between them is rather slow. Therefore, gardens can give insight in the perception of the environment. The qualities of the landscape only become meaningful if they can be experienced, and gardens provide the conditions for multi-sensory experience, the sensory experience of nature, close to the skin, palpable.

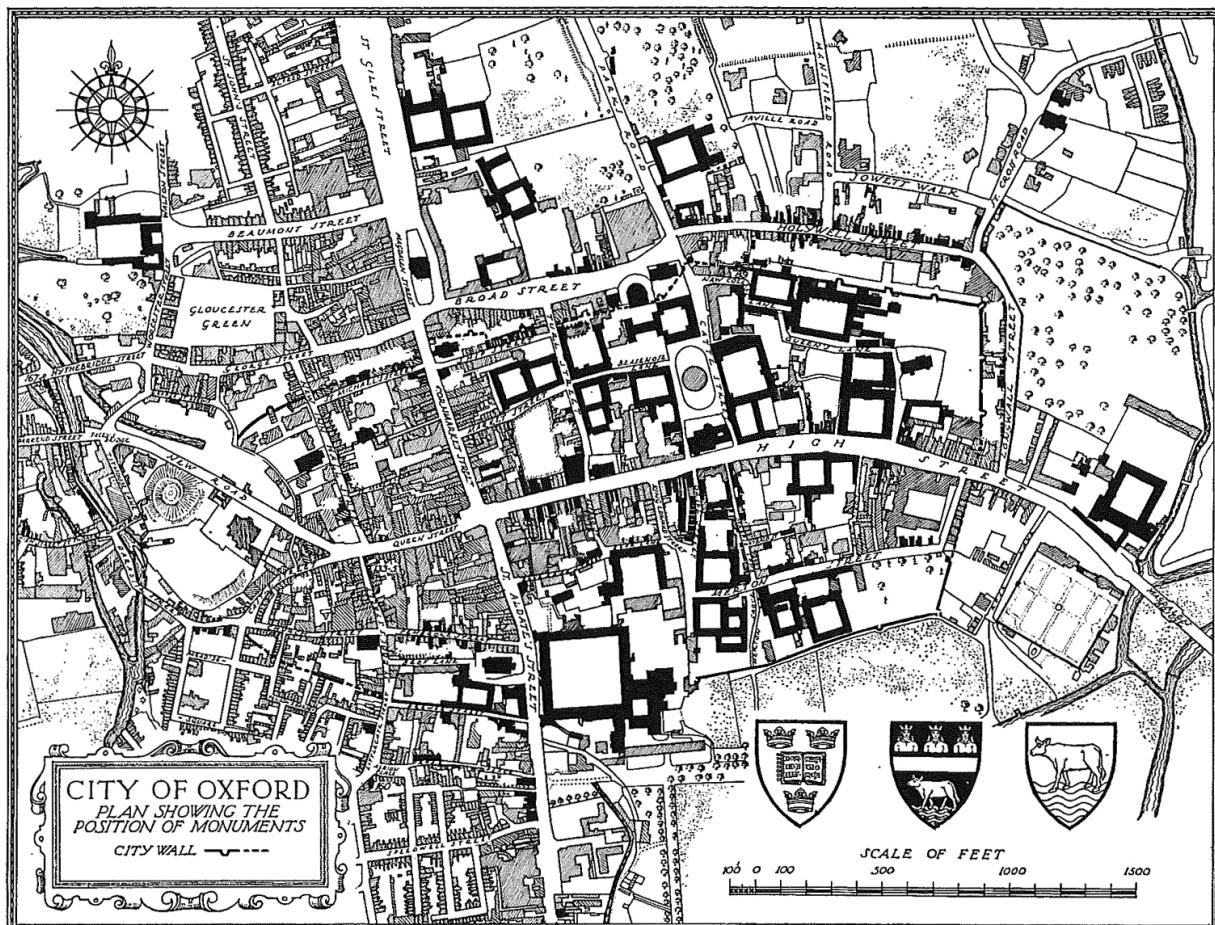


FIGURE 12. Galaxy of gardens (Drawing by Royal Commission on Historical Monuments England, 1939).

- The garden as an open green space. Citing landscape architect Jens Jensen, James Corner (2006) wrote that cities built for a wholesome life [include] the living green as an important part of their complex. This green complex comes in the form of parks and green open spaces (p. 24). However, we should not repeat the mistake of the Modernists to think that to define an open space as “green” will suffice to make it valuable in the reception and valuing by urban communities. An architectonic interpretation of this “green space” can mediate between man and nature. The position and design of gardens in urban landscape can be precise without being forceful.

As opposed to the intertwining of parks and green structures and a hierarchical and ordered urban composition, gardens can be aside of the urban tissue, and the expression of landscape is taking place within and in between those urban fragments, hidden and in the margin, indirect. Oxford is organised not as a coherent harmonious plan, but clotted around a myriad of quadrangles acting as cores of urbanisation, spread indiscriminately over city centre and open landscape. It is a flexible, open-ended system with an internal logic, dependant on time, coincidence and circumstance.

- The garden as a laboratory. Gardens can show us how to take the landscape as the starting point for urban developments. They trigger the imagination. In many ways the failing of twentieth century planning can be attributed to the absolute impoverishment of the imagination to extend new relationships and sets of possibilities. I am aware that the contemporary landscape is characterized more by instable and dynamic processes than by the compositional logic that determines the gardens of St. Catherine's College. System theory models seem to be better applicable than rational plans and spatial designs. However, if we would apply these models and allow the metropolitan landscape to arise as a logical consequence of integrating sustainable systems and processes, the spatial quality of our living environment would get lost in the process. The core business of a landscape architect will always be the creation of spatial compositions, however large the shifts in context and problematique, and what better laboratory and experiment is there than the garden? A laboratory other design professions don't have. We are lucky to have this, so let's start making better use of it.

ENDNOTES

- To describe this, geologist and Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen has introduced the term Anthropocene, the “age of man”: the current era, after the Holocene, which humanity intervenes as a force of nature on earth.

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