

Strategies of Brutal Recovery:

The Mill Park

Currently, the provincial town of Århus on the mainland of Denmark is undergoing a quite dramatic change. From the Middle Ages and right through to the twentieth century the stream running through the city was a basis of the town's existence. In the nineteen thirties the stream was covered up in order to give way to a road, but as we speak the stream is being uncovered again to create a leisurely environment in the city centre.

One of the central sites of this area is the Mill Park, which was designed in the nineteen thirties. With the un-covering of the stream, this park no longer seems to be responding to the character of the surroundings and the city of Århus has arranged competition for a new park design. The internationally renowned landscape architecture practice SLA Landscape Architects has won this competition, proposing a dramatic transformation of the site. In the new scheme, the situation of change is regarded as a positive opportunity, however, rather than an effort to make some kind of atonement or reparation for past mistakes. Two central issues underlie the new scheme: how to design with purchase on the history of the area and its changed – and changing – urban culture; and, how to change the park with reference to the past but without slavish historicism or newness for its own sake. The new scheme picks up on these issues in an interesting way by regarding history in a non-linear perspective, employing an idea of a regenerative, natural time and history as a field of reference. At the same time as the project deploys a brutal alteration of the existing park design it also cultivates a gentle recovery of the site and encompasses a dynamic sense of historical referentiality.

The Mill Park brief is supposed to recall the history of the area and is regarded as a kind of programme of preservation. Århus is placed in a moraine formation traversed by small river valleys, most prominently a west/east oriented river at whose mouth the old town of Århus is situated. The Mill Park is placed where the river valley meets the town and where the stream changes direction towards the bay. In this way it connects the inner city with the suburbs on the one side and with the sea on the other. In the

nineteenth century the area along the stream with promenades and attractive, rustic dwellings was still dominantly rural, while today it has been immersed into the city. In the nineteen thirties, however, when the stream was covered up, the Mill Park was designed at the edge of what used to be the stream and at the site of the city's oldest mill pond, which dates back almost 800 years. The park was laid out in front of a neo-classicist library building, which together with the strict geometrical park came to form a relative unity.



If the covering of the stream is a sign of brutal city-planners' aged and failed strategies for improving the infrastructure of Århus, by un-covering it planners are now once again quite violently changing the area. In this light, it is interesting that the project is regarded as a programme of preservation. The overthrowing of the planning strategies of the nineteen thirties indicates that *preservation* is regarded synonymous with *re-creation* of the former natural and leisurely environment around the stream. This rather paradoxical declaration does have a very interesting effect on the new Mill Park, however. The project operates in an expanded time-frame, and emphasis has been placed on a reference oriented-approach to the historical development of the site.

The New Mill Park

After the un-covering of the stream, the park will be directly connected to the water, and in the new scheme a large staircase opens the park towards the stream. The stairs can form a resting place and will simultaneously bring a sense of cohesion to the site by creating a visual dialogue with the large staircase in front of the library. As a reminder of the romantic garden that was situated near the mill in the nineteenth century, the new scheme is spa-



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tially varied and is laid out as serpentine paths in between different levels of vegetation. This means that the symmetry of the park from the nineteenth thirties will be broken to call on the previous landscape structure before it was straightened out to match the increasing traffic and the monumental appearance of the library. The new scheme will have lawns for flirting, benches for reading, a café and small ponds that can be used for paddling in the summer and ice-skating at wintertime. Simultaneously, the plantation itself re-introduces the topographical and biological characteristics of the drained meadow landscape from the time when the mill was still functioning. This will be accomplished by using particular kinds of grasses, particularly a number of tufts, which are characteristic of these kinds of water meadows.

The preservation strategy thus comes to form a rather brutal recovery of earlier natural conditions by using concrete physical traces to build up a narrative historical strategy. The frame of reference is not exclusive, how-



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ever, and in spite of the rather brutal changes to the geometrical park, its characteristics will not be fully eradicated. As an example, the current trees and a sculpture will be integrated into the new arrangement of the park. In a similar fashion, the concrete blocks that made up the paving stones in the neo-classical park design will be moved to the edges of the park, marking out its boundaries. Though forming a borderline between the park and the surrounding roads, the edge of the park is not restrictive; rather it becomes a zone of integration. The inclusion of bus stops within the park and a street-side café on that edge are examples of an effort to bring visitors as well as nearby inhabitants into communication and dialogue. In this way, the park attends to the surrounding context and participates in the metabolism of the town.

Alongside this effort at integration and participation, the new park scheme sustains a microclimate: A number of nozzles in the tufts atomise

the air with a mist that creates a moist atmosphere which changes the local climate. In a similar way, trees are used as wind screens that participate in creating a micro ecology. This form of introversion can also be seen in a larger perspective: by changing the plantation and by re-introducing elements that were present in the area prior to the creation of the Mill Park in the nineteen thirties, the park can become a kind of historical document that addresses the widespread disappearance of water meadows. Since this is only part of what the scheme calls upon, however, it avoids looking like a gesture of repentance. It simply works on the premises of landscape architecture's ability to be referential, thereby using the processes of the biological environment to invoke certain conditions that used to characterise the site.

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By calling on previous biological characteristics of the site as well as the use of elements that were part of the previous park environment, the new scheme builds up a narrative historical strategy by recalling the development of the area on the scale of the changes in its natural environment. This is done using landscape architecture as a practical tool that becomes operative and emphasises process-oriented succession between different conditions rather than pointing to a historical record as a rigid chronology of ruptures.

With the reference oriented approach to the Mill Park, the destructive mode of recovery that characterises the new scheme includes a moment of re-enactment of what characterised the place in the past. This can be called a *strategy of brutal recovery* where the re-introduction of past conditions demands a destruction of the geometric park and where the establishment of a micro-ecology is necessary to re-cover the moist water meadow landscape. This level points to strategies of introversion and an overthrowing of the current park design. At the same time, though, the approach is open and inclusive and also allows for future change, while at the same time deploying practices of integration and participation with respect to the immediate surroundings. What we find is thus a moment of brutal recovery alongside a gentle and process-oriented approach. This touches upon the possibilities inherent in landscape architecture to emphasise the distinctiveness of a particular place in a very tentative way, which, as the French philosopher Philippe Nys remarks, is a capacity not well understood.¹ The Mill Park scheme builds on an approach to landscape architecture, in which process-oriented, narrative elements re-create, re-enact and suggest certain dynamics that have characterised and still characterise the place. In this way it makes visible a sense of non-linearity that materializes as a very interesting suggestion of landscape architecture's particular capacity for being referential and for calling attention to a particular place.

- a. Staircase connecting the park and the river.
- b. The winding paths of the new Mill Park meets the neo classicist library building.
- c. Map of the new Mill Park.
- d. The winding paths in winter.



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¹ Philippe Nys: "Pour une herméneutique du paysage" in Michel Collot (ed.): *Les enjeux du paysage*, Ouisa 1997, p.350.

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