

# Atelier Coloco and the fourth dimension of the project

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## Abstract

*In the light of the new challenges on the horizon of contemporary urban design, emerges the sensitiveness of the landscapist, the ability to look at the complex urban metabolism as a set of processes, which increasingly include the social dimension. It is an eclectic sensitiveness, multiscalar, which looks at the ecological challenge and nature with a new spirit, measuring the health of a city in terms of the biological diversity and culture it contains. To this sensitivity the ATELIER Coloco adds a fourth dimension (of the project), which is expressed through art and performance as a liminal element, sublimating the contents, in the direction of urban design in the open space. For these young French landscape designers the project is thus an evolution of experiences at different dimensional levels: construction takes place in a processual and relational manner, also through the collective construction of gardens, spaces of conviviality, and transformation rituals of the residual space staged pragmatically, inscribed in everyday life.*

## Contemporary landscape

Landscape has developed progressively as a way of seeing since the fourteenth century. More than a natural phenomenon, it has evolved as a form of iconography, with the urban reality creating a dualism between city and countryside, between man-made environment and the natural environment. So the landscape is a narrative, as Cosgrove suggests:

"The idea of landscape is a way of seeing - a way in which some Europeans have represented to themselves and to others the world around them and their conception of social relations. The landscape is a way of seeing which has its own story, but this story cannot be understood except as part of a broader economic and social history, this has specific assumptions and consequences, whose origins and implications go far beyond the simple use or perception of the countryside, which implies techniques of expression of their own, but also the techniques shared with other domains of cultural practices " (D. Cosgrove 1990).

Starting from this consideration, the landscape is now at the crossroad of a sophisticated semiotic network (M. Jakob, 2009). In the current civilization of the image, landscape is a figure of speech born within urban culture to define its otherness, to idealize the move "back to nature", to exorcise the stark ugliness of life in the city. For it has become the core of a renewed debate that tries to respond to the crisis of urban planning and the incipient self-referentiality of the architectural gesture. The concept of landscape has ceased to refer to a romantic arcadia, the refuge of an intellectual and aesthetic bourgeois elite, just as it no longer represents the nature-city duality. The current culture has absorbed its metaphor and extended it to an infinite number of spaces and images, whether real or ephemeral: landscape has become a central figure in the panorama of contemporary society.

In the context of design culture, the view of landscape as the discipline of land transformation, involving urban planning on one hand and architecture on the other, we can see how the cultural narrative referred to the above is highly topical. In the last ten years landscape urbanism has become a new area of debate and possible innovative synthesis of two disciplines which both show signs of crisis and straying from the problems that threaten urban society and the natural environment.

If landscape is a representation, the evolution of the cultural landscape in terms of aesthetics can also be read as an evolution of this representation. Its image has been the theme and inspiration throughout the history of art in the construction of spaces on the threshold between the natural and the artificial, pictorial and photographic, and in literary form.

A good starting place for a consideration of the dialogue between art and landscape is the subject-nature relationship, a nature that reappears in representations at the end of the Middle Ages. M. Jakob sees the inception of the idea of landscape in Petrarch's letter known as "del Monte Venoso" (M. Jakob, 2009). Nature is no longer a sinister place to be feared, but an entity to be reappropriated. It is the emblem of a process of emancipation from the dictates of normative theology and socio-economic revival, which will lead to humanism and therefore to the prospect of the conquest of volume, depth, the materiality of the real world, and thus also of the natural space. Then with the cinema, passing through the cinematic experience of looking through the window of a moving train, the twentieth century added the dimension of time to the representation of the landscape. And once photography became a mass phenomenon, it accounted for its mass-cultural diffusion. Today nature is back at the center of our lives as something that could disappear, gravely endangered by the momentum of technological and industrial progress. The postmodern landscape is no longer the aestheticized idealization of the world other than the city. At the height of modernity, in the wake of the avant-garde utopias and the anti-biological spaces represented in late twentieth century film and literature, we witness the emergence of artificial landscapes, the extreme consequence of human endeavour in the transformation of the natural environment. Consequently, the contemporary landscape is no longer simply a category that can be ascribed to the natural area outside the city walls, it is now also urban, intellectual, digital and media-based. The contemporary landscape is the "omni-landscape" (M. Jakob 2009). It has been involved in the arriving at cultural awareness of ecology; the desire for nature creates a consciousness reflecting post-modern man's new relationship with it.

"Thus the history of the art (the genre of landscape painting) appears as a lengthy process of cultural refinement [of the artists] on themselves, an epistemological undertaking which, during the process, frees their vision, allowing the formation of landscape outside the studio" (M. Jakob, 2009, p.36).

Hence a new dimension of the design project, public space, garden, park, can form *outside the studio*, but also of art and performance, practices in and of the landscape. Today operating in a landscape perspective means being at the heart of the main requisites that are the premises for intervening in the open and public space.

"We are in the conditions of a possible new 'humanism' where the Promethean impetus has revealed its dark side, and a universe of values that combines pagan wisdom, new hedonism and holism takes centre stage once again. The project becomes contingency-based, with personal involvement. A project that is developed according to the conditions in which it operates" (C. Bianchetti 2011).

## **Coloco and the fourth project dimension**

Atelier Coloco is a French landscape atelier active since 1999, with a practice ranging from projects on a regional scale such as the green belt of Tripoli, through construction of small self-made gardens, ecological reuse of abandoned urban skeletons converted for new residential purposes, to the staging of urban practices of Guerrilla Gardening and performance in the public space.

Militants of a new "sustainable hedonism", the executive arm of the "third landscape" theorist Gilles Clément who they work with frequently, ATELIER Coloco are partisans of nature as a force for renewal and against the incipient accelerated planetary entropy. They are "explorers of urban diversity" who refuse to recognize the disciplinary corporate rationale, acting as a symbiotic structure that is continually assimilating new skills according to the project objectives ([www.coloco.org](http://www.coloco.org)).

Both practitioners of the public space and landscape architects, Coloco are champions of an eclectic, interdisciplinary sensibility, from micro to macro, which looks at the ecological challenge and nature with a new spirit, measuring the health of a city in terms of the biological diversity and culture it contains. To this sensibility the ATELIER Coloco adds a fourth dimension (of the project), which is expressed through art and performance as a liminal element, sublimating the contents, in the direction of urban design in the open space. For these young French landscape designers the project is thus an evolution of experiences at different dimensional levels: construction takes place in a processual and relational manner, also through the collective construction of gardens, spaces of conviviality, and transformation rituals of the residual space staged pragmatically, inscribed in everyday life.

The contemporary city requires a new dynamic approach to transformation, to be promoted through dialogue and sharing of experiences. The fourth dimension of the project, which synthesizes an important aspect of Coloco's mission, is part of a movement that involves new design practices in general. A generation of actors - collectives, artists, associations - which has repositioned the practice of architecture and urban planning in a multidisciplinary perspective and proposes and implements participatory projects concerning the city: reinventing the daily lives of citizens with pragmatic and sustainable projects that invite everyone to discover and share new ways to improve the urban landscape.

It's a new sensibility, which gradually shows its ability to meet the challenges of the postmetropolitan condition, to elaborate complexity and turn into reality the potential that lies at the intersection of experience and built space, a new awareness with respect to the role of architecture and art in social change, a practice that revives dormant utopian ideals.

The fourth dimension of the project works on space in its transitional dimension, occupying the timeframe between idea and realization, between plan and project, between strategy and tactics. It takes on the urgency of responding to needs and desires in a progressive manner, unifying doing with thinking in a continuous give and take, use and reuse of both conceptual and physical materials. For Coloco, as for other contemporary architects/activists, this dimension runs parallel to traditional design practices, becoming on one hand the place for experimentation and on the other the key to the microdynamics of urban transformation, taking care to involve citizens, gaining their consent on the ground and reviving the sense of community. This operational dimension is well suited to the fragmented fabric of the contemporary city, dotted with spatial networks of uncertain status, liminal, residual, unused spaces of

different kinds, ready to be colonized with micro-interventions and urban strategies, *points of crystallization*, social condensers, contact areas, initiatives for urban reconstruction and containment of land consumption.

Among the various projects carried out by Coloco, in the next section we will discuss the experience of Montpellier, a case that I had the opportunity to observe firsthand in its final phase in October 2010, which I believe makes very clear the concepts set out above.

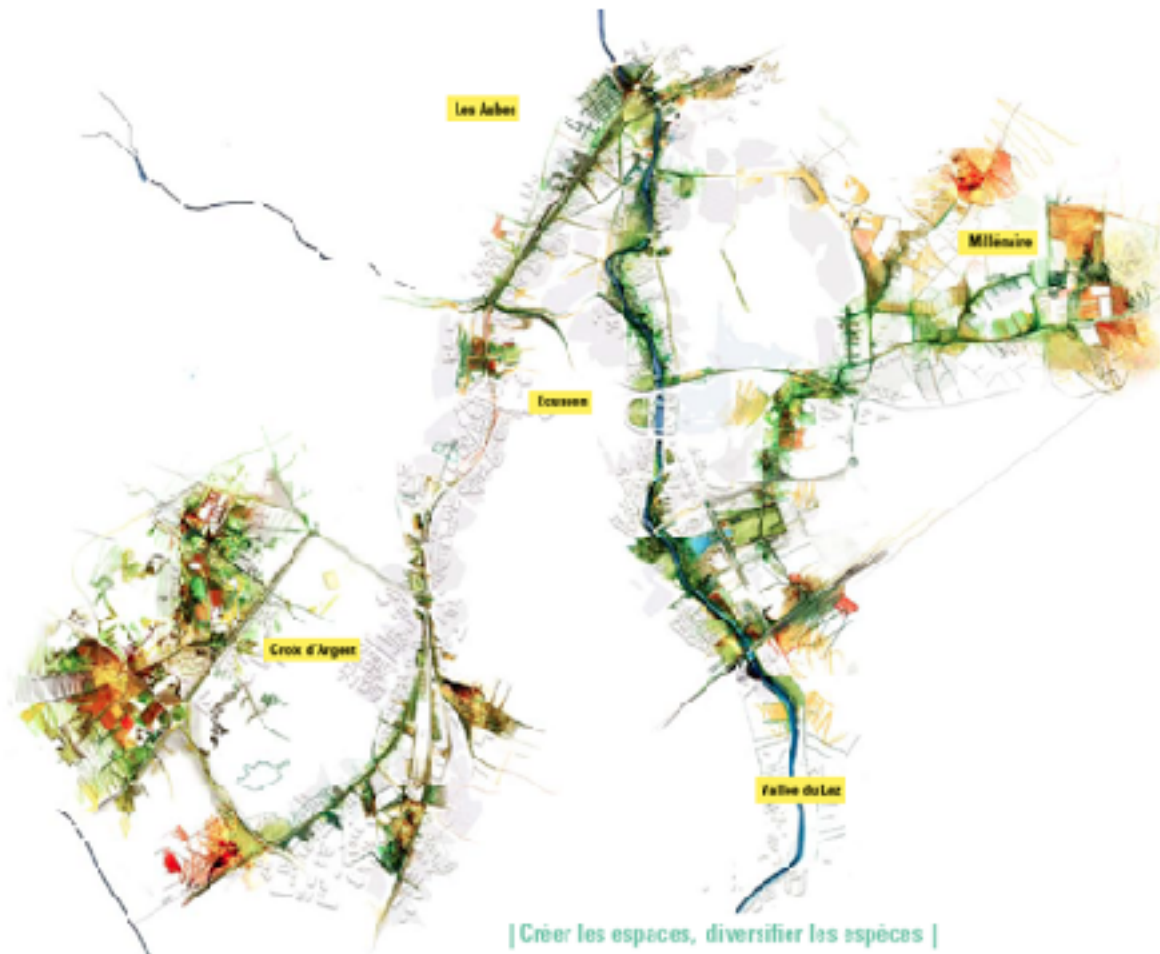


Picture 1 – Jardine Demain, Montpellier 2010, photo by Danilo Capasso

### **Jardin Demain and the development of a strategy for managing residual spaces unused Montpellier.**

During the last ten years the city of Montpellier has developed rapidly. This process of sudden metropolitan expansion has produced a mesh of residual spaces on which to work in order to claim new life to support biodiversity and the exploration of new public uses.

Jardin Demain is an operation launched by the City of Montpellier, the end result of a study started in 2009 by a partnership with the French landscape architect G. Clément and Atelier Coloco, for the elaboration of a strategy for managing unused residual spaces. The study considers the entire metropolitan area, starting from a mapping of the "green plots" of the third landscape, and then classification of the different types of residual spaces, to detect a power management scheme and enhancement, in both social and ecological terms. In my opinion this is a significant case study revealing the sensitivity of researchers / designers in transforming a research project into real experimental opportunities, bridging the gap between plan and project, overcoming the resistance of administrations and implementing a process of progressive urban regeneration.



Picture 2 - Development of a strategy for managing residual spaces of Montpellier, extracted from document research, p.7, G. Clement, Coloco.

The research involved the definition of strategic design and management solutions, stopping at the draft stage and identifying four main areas of intervention for an operational project prior to making a detailed inventory of the residual areas. In what follows we outline some of the main features developed in the study.

#### *A practical typology to orient the transformation*

The research project produced an accurate diagnosis and classification of residual areas of Montpellier and has established types and principles of action. The spaces have been classified with respect to the context, to the origins and potential; the typology can be subjective, making it possible to observe the particular aspects in which areas of any shape and size contribute to the definition of an overall framework on which to operate. Then the spaces studied were considered according to different criteria and combinations, even considering the natural ones that require much maintenance and involve complicated management, as well as those which have been abandoned and reverted to a mineral condition, and those needing to regain biological diversity. The research developed a master plan that establishes the relationship between the different natural areas, regardless of scale, that should be re-evaluated as part of the metro expansion project, enhancing the ecological and perceptive aspects but also the economic development opportunities.

This classification has identified six types of spaces:

- Cores: habitats that have a significant biodiversity, preserving and enriching. Spaces that may have a tendency to expand and connect with other biological habitats adjacent (wild and uncultivated green areas that have taken over).
- Vectors: important structures of connection between systems, often with a strong visual impact (track and infrastructure in disuse)
- Isolated: uneven spaces in transformation, remains of site areas, border areas of infrastructure to be incorporated into the natural urban fabric.
- Minimal components: spontaneous plant species that are born in the crevices of impervious surfaces, such as concrete walls and paved surfaces not subject to maintenance, often not considered.
- Domesticated greenery: sophisticated and expensive horticulture, in terms of materials and maintenance time, to be reconsidered in a global integrated management (highly organized gardens with sown species).
- Unused mineralized spaces: impervious surfaces where it is necessary to re-establish soil to accommodate diversity (asphalt paving)

### *Create space, diversify the species*

The study projects a long-term vision of the possible relations between the three experimental areas examined, taking into account systems of abandoned spaces, existing and future biological networks, with as a final result a new vision of Montpellier in a sustainable perspective. The tools consist of the identification of alternative management policies, new principles for the implementation of future projects, and the networking of natural open spaces. In this sense it is possible to create new biological corridors and new spatial relationships: rivers, forests, gardens, wetlands, promoting biological diversity within the city. In a context of urban pressure it is imperative to operate in all types of space and on all scales: diversity becomes an integrated quality of urban life and should be considered in relation to the daily life of the inhabitants.

### *Organize actions and policy interventions*

The goals for the city of Montpellier defined in the study must be realized through the action of the various actors involved: citizens and stakeholders. These actions are represented in a series of project sheets, which serve as a framework for developing initiatives for environmental management of areas identified. An inventory of these actions was carried out in the districts taken as a pilot study, to be later extended to the entire municipality. The development of an experimental project management in partnership with local associations and the town of Montpellier, can afford to make the four reference designs in four different sites. These tests combine the different principles of implementation, in the direction of minimal interventions providing growth and the preservation of diversity in key ecological features.

### *Management objectives and methods of spatial approach*

The objective of preserving the free spaces in cities coincides with the definition of a principle of minimal, environmentally friendly handling. Analyzing management methods currently obtaining in these spaces, the research aims to revise the criteria of differentiation for each site according to a common sense philosophy. In addition, the study proposes extensive, economically sustainable management for each area while preserving important areas of land without any intervention, to protect the presence of the third landscape in the urban scenario.



### **Jardin Demain, Cité Lemasson, from strategy to practice**

It is the final stage of preparation of research that shows the pragmatic sensibility guiding the practice of Coloco. In this case, the fourth project dimension is developed through negotiations with the public institution of reference, the municipality, to test ideas directly in the field, jumping from building strategies directly to implementation. As stated by the authors during a conversation (M. Georgieff 10/10/2010) negotiation can affect the expected outcome, convincing the city council to make a first test of the practices proposed in the study and selecting an inventoried site. Hence Jardin Demain, the staging of the fourth dimension of Coloco design, implements a shared garden that takes form with a collective construction event, a community ritual. The site chosen is at Cité Lemasson, a suburb of public housing programs hit by environmental regeneration: a large housing estate painfully seeking to acquire a human face, in part through technological retrofit of the buildings.

In the case described here, Coloco gardener designers identified the rear courtyard of a building, a paved surface for the use of parking, which overlooks the entire building. An area of public property, belonging to living in a state of decay and of little use. In this space Atelier Coloco and the town of Montpellier, stage Jardin Demain.



Picture 3 - Jardin Demain, Montpellier 2010, photo by Danilo Capasso

The construction of this garden was shared in the space of two days in October 2010 in an atmosphere of conviviality as residents encountered the various people involved in the event.

For the realization, Atelier Coloco first conducted a phase of dialogue with the inhabitants of the site, such as main reference and future users of the garden, to involve them in the construction and make them responsible for their maintenance. After negotiation with the citizens and the City Council, a scheme was designed defining the dimensions of the flower beds, the distribution of species, functions, and furnishings. The town, on the basis of these indications, has taken steps to remove the

layer of asphalt courtyard, move gravel, soil, planting some trees and provide accommodation for a minimum water system. At this point, with the preparation of sites for the arrangement of furnishings, also these to be built on site, the semi-finished garden could be made. In the two-day event, with a team of 14 municipal gardeners, the collective Coloco and the inhabitants of the neighborhood participating, this produced tanks for the cultivation of vegetables, benches, fences, tables, covers and plants. The wood for the furniture, made on the spot, was recycled, the plants came from a nursery that has granted a sponsorship, school children came with their teachers to contribute to the ritual of planting.

The garden Cite Lemasson opened at the end of the two days with a community celebration in the presence of the chairman of the council of Montpellier, with the classic ribbon cutting: proving that you can build a bridge between strategies and practices, including project and operational reality, but that these can only emerge where the actors in the field, public and private institutions and creative professionals look for a common synthesis. Where the public body is present, and turns its gaze to the potential and opportunities that can be generated by the processes of participation and involvement, not by appealing to a vacuum spontaneity, but providing solid roots (such as the study of which we have spoken) and strategies that can give space to these interesting practices of urban regeneration.

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Project documentation gently provided by Atelier Coloco

## **Website**

<http://www.coloco.org>

<http://www.montpellier.fr/>

watch the video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PG-hHWJS04w>