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Framing landscape. An architectural graduation project that feasts on military heritage

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Abstract: As a form of space, landscape is torn between attributes of nature and artifice, loss and creation, identity and otherness. This paper addresses these oppositions by discussing landscape in terms of framing. It presents architecture student projects redesigning vacant military heritage in the urban landscape. Architecture is an art of framing. In architecture, as in painting or film, a frame separates an imaginary space from its real environment. The imagination of space may be framed by design or by discourse. These are acts of either repressive power or of creative empowerment. Ordering and stimulating the interaction of subjects with objects, frames inaugurate the deployment of everyday life and the invention of spatial practices. As a contribution to these issues, this paper presents the methods and results of the graduation studio ‘Champ de Mars’.

Keywords: architecture, art, frame, military heritage, reuse, urban landscape

1 Introduction
Suppose that landscape is about the human experience of space, and of manmade or man-affected space in particular; suppose that architecture is able to frame this experience; then let us use landscape and framing as concepts, or rather as passwords, coined to enter a world accessible to anyone interested. The passwords ‘framing landscape’ possess an evasive nucleus and an irregular boundary. This vagueness is not a failure but a facility: it stimulates interaction with other passwords like ‘reuse’ while it liberates us from prejudices as if landscape is to be found only outside the city, or that architecture is exclusively embodied inside buildings. Escaping definition, ‘framing landscape’ becomes more compelling, more seductive, and more involved in urgent issues, in things that matter. Landscape matters, and especially its experience and its education. What concerns us here is the necessity to reset landscape as something not (or not exclusively) belonging to the disciplines of urbanism, planning and ecology, where it is valued, to put it bluntly, as green, rural, natural, and untouched, or, if touched, then valued as threatened, and, if cultural, then valued as in need of conservation. What is a landscape framed by architecture inside the city like? Why does it matter? And to whom does it concern?

2. The art of framing
‘Common Ground’ was the theme of the 13th Architecture Biennale of Venice in 2012. It addressed issues of common spaces (‘commons’), of shared history (identity), and of transmitted knowledge (discipline). One example is ‘Architecture. Possible here? Home-for-all’ by Toyo Ito and team, which documents a dialogue with multiple points of view on a disaster site, joining survivors and designers in a serious and resourceful imagination of the resurrection of Rikuzentakata, reusing for example trees swept off by the tsunami. On the basis of an awareness of the common, the Biennale also touched upon the uncommon, the groundless, the erased, and thus the problem of foundation.

Returning to the matter that concerns us here, our thesis is that architecture frames landscape. (Cache, 1995) It has the knowledge to do it and is the art to shape it, according to a wide range of uses and functions, liable to re-foundation and re-use – perhaps the most challenging design task today. Architects do not only have the possibility but also the task to frame landscape. Why architects, and why not urban planners or ecologists? Architects involved in the reuse of industrial, military, and religious heritage must make choices about demolition or restoration, the values of history and memory. All these choices concern
‘common ground’, and often it is urban ground. It is perfectly reasonable to ask urban planners to reorganize the infrastructure and to readjust zoning regulations, but then the experience of landscape, in the full sense that it implies (Berque, 1995), is either overlooked, or only addressed in the last resort, as an additional quality to be defined, preserved or invigorated. Admittedly, ecologists could deal with this thing called landscape (and they do, of course), but they never take it as a gathering, a place that gathers humanity and means a world. (Heidegger, 1954) In a truly meaningful sense a thing is a place to meet, it is not just an object consumed by a subject but a matter that concerns us as involved subjects (Latour and Weibel, 2005). Landscape is both the object and the subject of sadness and joy, of fear and desire. Architects know that and have, or must acquire, the facility to experience it. Ecology and biology do address landscape as a perceptual and emotional thing when they discuss it in terms of milieu and habitat, but they still seem unwilling to grasp the human, historical, and poetic values of landscape that it embodies for humans.

Landscape architecture is a kind of architecture, but landscape architects hardly consider themselves as architects – as designers, yes, as sensitive to perception, yes, as able to visualize plans, yes, as culturally informed, of course! And yet, they often deny the fact that it is architecture that reveals landscape to us, and that walls, windows, gates, roads, canals, bridges and other artifacts, like trimmed hedges and lined trees, frame landscape perception. On the other hand, architects often shy away from their own capability in this matter. Why? Is it because they leave the groundwork to urban planners and turn inwards for the built environment? As we will see below, ‘in situ’ art interventions can teach architects to deal with the loss of function of objects with imagination and involvement.

Initiated by my colleague André Walraven, and tutored by him and by myself, the graduate studio ‘Champ de Mars’ of the faculty of the built environment of the university of Eindhoven proposed the empty Tapijijn Barracks of Maastricht as a case to explore military architecture and its potential to reframe landscape inside the city. (Fig. 1.) Fascinating facts emerged, such as the siege of Maastricht by Sébastien Vauban in 1673 (Fig. 2.). From this martial field students liberated ideas for a peaceful civic reuse - perhaps naive but equally fascinating. A studio is a didactic laboratory. At the moment of writing this paper the research is finished but the students are still in the middle of the design process. The aims are: understanding urban landscape, learning from artists to play with loss of function, and expressing the memory of the place. The methodology includes the study of: barracks typologies, the fortifications of Maastricht, narratives related to the military, and visual art dealing with loss and change of function. The ‘Vauban connection’ invited us to make a fieldtrip to Paris where students studied the reuse of Le Champ de Mars and Les Invalides, one legacy committed to the image of the future, the other to the glory of the past; the first occupied by joggers and tourists in an almost military way, the second more fluid, open to a public of visitors and passers-by; and both inseparable of the Parisian skyline. Based on the didactic aims outlined above, a number of themes evolved that I will discuss below. Although the results failed to deal with all the theoretical questions, far from it, they make a modest contribution to the scope of this congress, ‘Imagination and Landscape’, and in particular to the topic ‘Arts’, which we took in the sense of the art of framing. I will discuss ten projects under the student’s first name. Their full names are mentioned in the credits.

3. Maastricht and Vauban
In 1673 the French conquered Maastricht under the command of the famous military engineer and marshal Vauban. The siege lasted less than three weeks, a record. Vauban first took St. Pieter’s Hill south of the city, not fortified at the time, and started digging trenches parallel to the city walls, zigzagging ever closer. Having conquered Maastricht, he fortified the city and the hill according to geometrical figures that avoid dead angles. He also transformed the course of the Jeker, a tributary to the Meuse, into an inundation system. As anyone who has seen the incredibly beautiful models on display in Les Invalides, Vauban had a great eye for landscape. When the students of the studio Champ de Mars were challenged to interest younger generations in the vicissitudes of warfare (why the fortifications had become obsolete and demolished, and in what sense the Tapijijn Barracks represented a new military regime, in its turn today obsolete), they rejected the option of presenting the remains in a museum-like manner. Some students wanted to exhibit them in the landscape as a whole, and unearth erased defense and sight lines. (Fig. 4.)
On the basis of this vision, Peter designed a ‘base of operation’ to explore the city, adapting the officer’s barracks into a hotel providing a minimal accommodation, equipped to support tourist attacks on nearby café’s, restaurants, monuments, shops and other objects of interest. He stripped the building to clarify its essence, retaining a public arcade and flexible floors. Frank used the metaphor of the hermit lobster that occupies an existing shell to lodge its weak body. He designed serviced homes for the elderly, attempting to avoid the patronizing air of most elderly homes by clearing the geometry of the military compound with a view to assure both privacy and collectivity. ‘Fossilizing’ the facades of the ‘corps de logis’ by masonry, piercing new windows and reclaiming the middle axis for artistic venues that interest many elderly people while attracting a larger public, he transformed the rest into independent homes, with services to be housed in other buildings of the barracks. Pursuing a different course, Corina discovered that Vauban’s sense of place not only cunningly exploited the primary topography but also created a ‘second landscape’. Given the fact that today the ‘Tapijn Barracks are severed from the urban landscape, she kept only the identifying buildings, demolished the rest, and adopted camouflage strategies to create a second landscape that restores the green belt around the city. (fig. 6) As the main piece she designed a ‘fortress of light’ – a metaphor of a research and care park for light therapy, most welcome under northern climes. In the current condition of having to reshape a given landscape, architecture can no longer be a solid frame. Thus the sloping ‘roofscape’ expresses a search for a more fragile frame of technology and artifice, inserted in the landscape that it both contains and opens.

4. Losses and gains of function
Since only fragments of the historical military scenery remain, the preservation of isolated buildings makes no sense when you want to display the former martial grip on landscape. In this respect artists can teach designers to give an unexpected turn to objects or places that have lost their function, and invent a poignant experience of reality. (Fig. 3) Three students developed a vision in which, rather than adapting existing buildings to new functions, they interpreted them as frames for bodies to move about. (Fig. 5) Applying the theory of architect Bernard Tschumi of space as event, they de-framed the military grounds for the public, and re-framed it by making frames-in-
5. Military into Civil values

The former military enclave was contained in a solid frame. Facades and fences turned a blind eye to the interior of the site, of which citizens couldn’t even catch a glimpse. A couple of students wanted to make this frame more transparent, not just literally but also as a figure of speech and thought. Marcel and Wessel proposed a residential version of the cozy architecture of the barracks pavilion typology. A new trend of communal living inspired them to use the military hierarchy for a residential park organized in 'divisions' that share common ground. Because the existing order only embodied collectivity, adopting it for housing required a modification in the sense of introducing privacy frames; and because that would cause unwanted oppositions, they designed a third frame, a transitional space, where neighbors chat and children play. Wessel designs new houses after the ‘parallel trenches’ of Vauban, a nearly imperceptible artifice that keeps the recreating public (massive in summer) at a distance, while sparing frames for the residents to ‘shoot’ a view of the medieval city.
slashed into the concrete roof, as if an explosion destroyed the weaker parts, makes the strong beams stand out robustly against the sky – an intervention designed to bring in light but also to reveal a shocking and yet invigorating analogy of military and social struggle.

6. Conclusions
Did the graduate studio ‘Champ de Mars’ succeed in the intended metamorphosis? Did the architecture students transform the field designed under the sign of the God of War into a ‘Champ de Venus’ (who was, as we all know the goddess of Love, but also a lover of Mars)? In the process of finding viable ways to reinterpret military perception (optical, ballistic) and give it a civic turn (the perception of residents, workers, clients, and tourists), the art of the frame proved to be essential. It was required both to understand the existing urban landscape, and to envisage a new programmatic and expressive handling that visualizes and values the given, often hidden traces of the past. As they abducted military means for civic ends, the architecture students were learning to sensitize their architectural means to the entire environment they were re-framing. Considering the urgent reduction of the planetary footprint of cities, our case study of the demolition, preservation, and/or transformation of military heritage contributes to a wider prospect: not that of the tabula rasa but of the tabula plena – an invitation to feast on its sweet and bitter menu.

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