Drawings vs. photos
in the representation of landscape architecture

Valerio Morabito
dArTe - Dipartimento Architettura e Territorio, Università degli Studi Mediterranea di Reggio Calabria, Italia
Stuart Weitzman School of Design, University of Pennsylvania, USA
valerio.morabito@unirc.it, morabito@design.UPenn.edu

Abstract

At the beginning of the last century, Walter Benjamin questioned the reproducibility of works of art, focusing on photography and movie. The re-reading of his famous essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, opens questions about the authenticity of drawings (both analog or digital) and digital images' reproducibility in contemporary Landscape Architecture.

The first part of this text attempts to update and relate to landscape design representation Benjamin's concepts of concentration and distraction in perceiving works of art; to question the contemporary duality between landscape drawings and digital images to concentration and distraction.

The second part presents two contemporary landscape architecture approaches to better speak about concentration and distraction, photography and drawing, originality and reproducibility. The first one is related to Gareth Doherty's methodology in perceiving and drawing places and territories as original works of landscape representations; the second speaks about James Corner's landscape analysis, drawings, images, and design strongly connected to the reproducibility of digital pictures.

The last part of the text affords the authenticity of drawings, which Benjamin identified in the possibility of being placed at a specific time and within a particular place, affirming the importance of the originality in contemporary drawings to represent landscape architecture ideas.

Keywords

perception, originality-concentration, reproducibility-distraction

Re-reading the Benjamin essay

Concentration and distraction are two primary concepts in Benjamin's essay. Benjamin says that a traditional work of art, a painting or a sculpture needs concentration to be perceived by the observer. The places where to exhibit the works of art are usually small, limiting the number of observers. In general, the observer stays in front of a work of art to feel pleasure exuded by it, understand meanings and significances, and criticize the author's techniques and skills. As a consequence, the observer is absorbed by the work of art, becoming part of it. The more the observer is concentrate, the more the work of art absorbs the observer (Benjamin, 1969).

On the contrary, photos and movies capture details that the author did not want to catch; they enlarge visions and change light and atmosphere using different techniques. In a cinema, observers watch movies in bigger spaces without putting concentration in every frame. Observers, being a mass, influence each other by expressions, moods, pleasures, disappoints or dislikes. Benjamin (1996, p. 18) says that the observer "absorbs the work of art" in a state of distraction caused by people's mass.

Among the different works of art, architecture, Benjamin (1996, p. 18) also adds, is a prototype of work of art perceived "by a collectivity in a state of distraction." If it is real for architecture, it is also valid for landscape architecture because parks, gardens, and public spaces are places used by the mass of people that perceive them through a distracted attitude of shared pleasure.

However, Benjamin does not consider that a work of art of landscape architecture (and architecture) has two moments of perception: one related to the representation of projects, and the other when people observe and use them after their realization. This duality has implied numerous considerations over the history of landscape architecture. It regards the process of changing from representation to construction, according to clients' desires, laws, rules, workers' skills in building projects, and economic issues. Maintenance and use of parks, gardens, and public spaces, also play a crucial role, well explained by John Dixon Hunt in his book, *The Afterlife of Gardens*[1].

In the past, when parks and gardens were mostly private spaces, this duality between representation and realization was less evident because of the reduced amount of original drawings produced according to the designers' ideas and skills.

For example, Jean de La Quintinie convinced Luis XVI about the quality of the kitchen garden, le Jardin potager, at Versailles, built during the 1660s, presenting his idea showing "real, colorful, fragrant and tasty fruits and vegetables. Large and luscious pears placed on the king's table in the winter month

51

of February represented the gifts of the kitchen garden" (Mukerji, 1997, p. 170).

For that reason, most classical landscapes had created under political conditions in which very few people examined drawings of projects and decided whether to build them (Thorbjörn, 2008, p. 76).

Drawings, limited in number and recognizable by designers' techniques and languages, were perceived by clients with a necessary concentration, and, according to Benjamin's theory, drawings absorbed clients. Sometimes, evocative landscape architecture drawings endure unrealized projects. An extraordinary example is Humphrey Repton's drawings, helping "his clients envision suggested improvements to their property."[2]

Lithography (Benjamin, 1969, p. 2) was a pivotal technique to reproduce works of art in general; it played a crucial role in spreading the importance of landscape architecture ideas to improve cities' qualities when private parks became public parks.

Insofar as the lithography - invented by Alois Senefelder in the Kingdom of Bavaria in 1796[3] - was a big revolution in the reproducibility of works of art, another crucial revolution in reproducing landscape architecture representations (and not only) happened in 1960'. It was the invention of the commercial xerographic office photocopying that, during the 1980', had "the convergence in some high-end machines between the roles of a photocopier, a fax machine, a scanner, and a computer network-connected printer into a multi-function printer."[4]

Drawings of landscape architecture gradually lost the authenticity that Benjamin recognized as "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 3). However, the most decisive step happened at the beginning of this century with the improvement of personal computers and software like photoshop, which opened new relationships between originality of drawings and reproducibility of images in representing ideas and design of landscape architecture.

Later, software like Rhino, Cinema 4D, and Lumion has made the opportunity to build digital 3D models, from which it is now possible to take an incredible number of realistic images.

Nowadays, there is an evident split between the originality of drawings and the reproducibility of images. A few drawings still maintain their originality even if they are realized by software because the reproducibility does not undermine their original authority (Benjamin, 1969, p. 3). On the contrary, many images, coming from 3D digital models, have become photos and videos, embodying the new frontier of landscape representation perceived in a state of distraction (Benjamin, 1969, p. 18).

Concentration and distraction in landscape architecture

In 2013, at the Isabella Stewart Garden Museum in Boston, an exhibition entitled *Composite Landscapes*, curated by Charles Waldheim and Andrea Hansen, examines "one of landscape architecture's most recognizable representational forms, the montage view" (Valdheim and Hansen, 2014, p. 15). Among many concepts and ideas coming from it, the exhibition questioned the transition between analog images and digital images. Photomontages and montages realized cropping paper figures and glued on paper support were compared to digital montage images (fig. 1, 2).

In that exhibition, it was evident that, for a while, digital images have borrowed the same creative process from analog drawings, making them faster (in some ways) and more dynamic (for others), maintaining the same expressiveness in meanings, spaces, and geometries. This cultural transition opened an intense cultural debate - still unfinished and, in some ways, insoluble - between the originality of drawings and their digital reproducibility.

Yves Brunier's drawings are milestones in the transit between analog and digital pictures. Their essence is strongly evident when he "explored this ex-
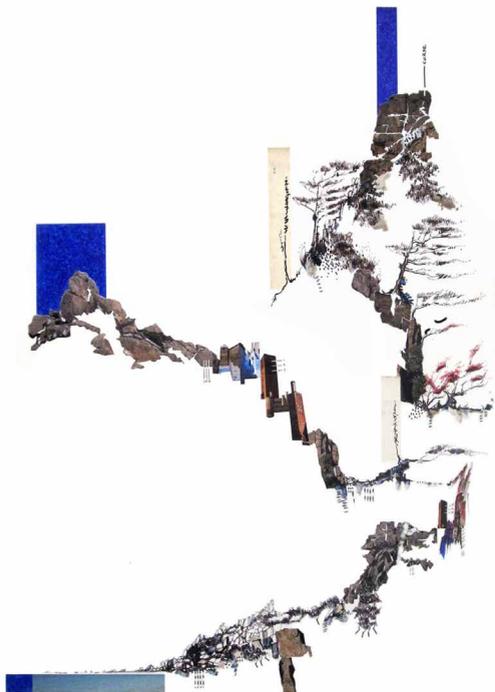
Fig. 1 – Morabito V. (2014). *Memory and Landscape.* Ink and paper on cardboard. In, *Composite Landscape*, edited by Valdheim C. and Hansen A. 2014, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Germany.
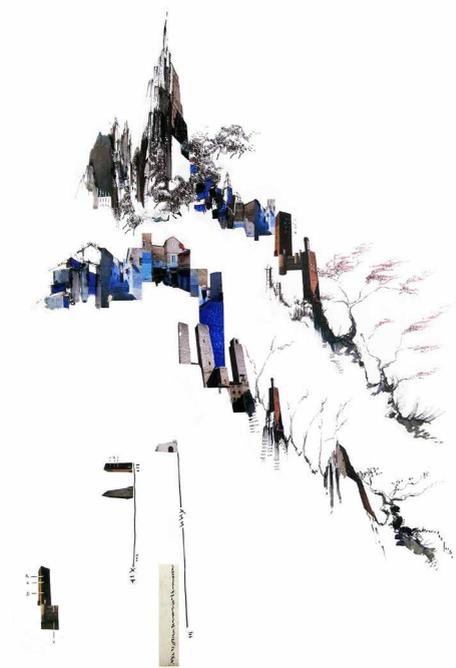
Fig. 2 – Morabito V. (2014). *Landscape and Memory.* Ink and paper on cardboard. In, *Composite Landscape*, edited by Valdheim C. and Hansen A. 2014, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Germany.

panded view of a landscape that is not private and pastoral, but public, urban and constructed" (Vald-heim and Hansen, 2014, p. 19).

Brunier was, perhaps, the first landscape architect who communicated to a mass of people through the originality of his drawings. Benjamin says that the originality of a work of art maintains an au-ra well recognizable because it is easy to place it in time and space, recognizing its uniqueness. Bruni-er's contemporary landscape drawings maintain their originality, surviving their projects, built or not. Another iconic example of this kind of originality in the passage between analog and digital techniques was OMA's drawings for the Park de La Villette in Paris. Even if the project did not win the competi-tion, the drawings were able to spread an idea of the landscape that was "not for a definitive park, but for a method that - combining programmatic in-stability with architectural specificity - will eventu-ally generate a park."[5] Those drawings survived the competition, and they still are examples of how to imagine and create new ideas: they maintain their originality in the end.

In his first creative phase, James Corner worked on the duality of analog and digital representations, translating real data into abstract synthetic draw-ings prelude to designing ideas. Scholars and stu-dents have recognized his famous maps as original works of art that preserve all their authority, "impos-sible to perform on a reproduction" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 2). Through poetic analysis, Corner perceived the American landscapes, translating MacLean's photos captured from above in maps that are actual exam-ples of originality in contemporary landscape repre-sentation (Corner and MacLean, 1996).

Zaha Hadid probably, made well evident the drama of transition between originality and reproducibili-ty in a society in which masses of people ask to be more involved in the transformation of cities and need more speed and actions. The first her oil paint-ings well express the link between originality and reproducibility. Still, in the small sketches she drew for the park the la Villette competition exhibited at MOMA in New York, it is possible to see all the poet-ic drama in understanding and guiding this revolu-tionary historical transition.

Originality, concentration, reproducibility, and distraction nowadays

At the beginning of the last century, Albert Einstein created an indissoluble link between space and time, creating a new space-time category. Accord-ing to this concept, contemporary landscape repre-sentation could be divided into the category of orig-inality-concentration and reproducibility-distrac-tion. Even if it is impossible to trace perfect limits or boundaries between these two categories, it is pos-sible to recognize them easily.

Two conferences held in the same cultural context[6] can help to talk about the characteristics that iden-tify the category of concentration-originality and distraction-reproducibility in the contemporary rep-resentation of landscape architecture: the first one comes from Professor Gareth Doherty in discern-ing and creating new visions of landscapes; the sec-ond focuses on James Corner and Field Operation's actions in rethinking and designing contemporary landscapes.

For Doherty, walking is a primary experience that leads to attention toward small physical and im-material details, otherwise impossible to notice in an increasingly fast society that needs fast land-scape solutions. They are traces left by natural and ecological landscape processes; they are traces left on the ground by extreme weather events; signs scratched on the surface by landscape exploitations for humans' needs; as well as symbols coming from immaterial events or vernacular cultural attitudes toward small actions of destroying-preserving, us-ing-restoring, natural contexts, and biodiversities. As an acute collector, Doherty reads traces, notes, and portrays them. Walking on the ground eludes

the need to have a pre-established overall view. Still, collecting photos and drawings, meeting people, and gathering together their experiences, he feels humans contradictions that affect landscapes around. The small, sometimes invisible, traces are organized and cataloged, patiently, in books and exhibitions that generate the landscape's overall view. In applying this process, Doherty is conscious of the importance of traces in explaining extremely significant events[7].

His books and exhibitions are works of art in classical Benjamin's idea of original works of art; walking on the ground, Doherty establishes their "presence in time and space," their "unique existence at the place where" they happened "to be"" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 3). He responds to what Umberto Eco defined as an open work when he prints and reproduces these books on bigger scales to be exhibited in public spaces and plazas (Eco, 1989).

People had to pay personal concentration to these books and exhibitions; they concentrated on them to be absorbed. An observer can not be distracted from the mass.

Corner highlights the evolution of his idea of the landscape from the originality of drawings to their reproducibility. Climatic conditions such as abnormal temperature peaks, unusual rainfall, combined with the difficulties for soils to absorb more or less water, modified morphologies stressed by the growth of human activities are the main themes to which he and Field Operation are working on, switching their attention from vernacular details to general universal themes. This change in the landscape's thinking has brought him to pass from the category of originality-concentration to reproducibility-distraction.

This process is evident in the three design solutions for *The National Mall Tidal Basin*[8] in Washington DC. Due to recent floods and extreme climatic events, the ecological distortions ask for immediate action to preserve monuments and improve the ecosystem.

Corner proposes three solutions: in the first one, Nature is left free to reoccupy its spaces, a sublime look at the landscape and its future; the second designs a series of new ecological islands that, according to a strategy well organized by detailed scientific analysis, can protect existing monuments; the third, the most political and the least utopian (says Corner), realizes a series of new morphologies able to contain the floods and preserve the identity of the city.

The three hypotheses, different for political messages, in topographic solutions, and social programs, are represented by reproducing photographic pictures and videos. They are real and realistic, telling us that all three answers are possible. A reproducible message to be absorbed immediately by masses of observers. Involved emphatically, they react immediately to pictures' primary message: the urgency of acting.

Every scenario is plausible because they presuppose actions, take on climate change, improve the ecology of urban spaces, and make the landscape resilient. It is a call to speed for a new urgent landscape, different from the Futurist Movement's message that, at the beginning of the last century, enthusiastically called for machines' speed.

However, despite their evocative and, in a way, romantic message, these images will not survive their project, whether it will be realized or not. Their porpoise is not to stay like original works of art; reproduced many times, they will be absorbed by as many people as possible.

Benjamin says that this reproduction process "can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will. Furthermore, photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture images which escape natural vision" (Benjamin, 1969, pp. 3-4).

Corner has gone from drawing images to take pictures of landscape design.
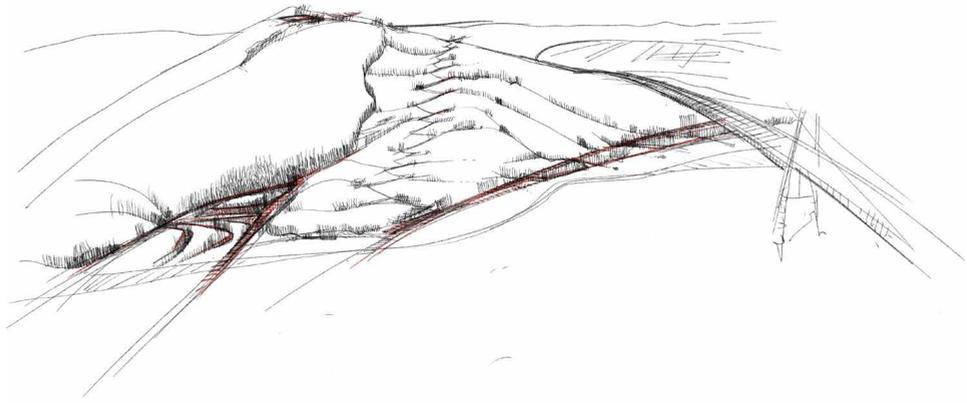
On supporting originality-concentration

This text explores the relationship between originality-concentration (figg. 3-4) and reproducibility-distraction (figg. 5-6). Although originality-concentration and reproducibility-distraction do not have exact boundaries or dogmatic definitions, it is possible to assert that reproducibility-distraction involves more the sense of sight; originality-concentration concerns more the act of reading drawings (May, 2019). Either category determines a specific way of designing the landscape.

Designing with the sense of sight presupposes taking real photos of evocative and, perhaps, monumental shapes and forms from 3D digital models, emphatically and immediately engaging.

The act of reading needs drawings produced by written narratives that transcend the usual boundaries of form and significance to explore all unexpected possibilities given by imperfections of thought, the randomness of imagination, and creative contingencies.

Nowadays, landscape architecture projects are much more complex, and they must respond to climate-changing with urgent and necessary solutions. Reproducibility-distraction is essential in involving communities to absorb, as much as possible, new landscape design solutions. People have to see photos of beautiful realistic ecological landscapes, to imagine better scenarios than our environments, characterized by extreme flood events, heat picks, coastal erosion, and dry seasons.

However, examples like Doerthy's landscape experiences tell us that there are still rooms for landscape expressions in which originality and concentration are crucial qualities.

Paraphrasing what Calvino wrote at the beginning of his lecture on lightness[9], this text supports the values of originality-concentration by aptitude and affinity. It does not mean that it considers virtues of reproducibility-distraction any less compelling. Still, it believes that the category of originality-concentration (fig. 6) and the very poetic afflatus of authenticity might provoke new experiences of concentration by the mass of observers, inventing a different narrative time for spreading innovative, imaginative, and utopian landscape ideas.

A different narrative time generated by originality-concentration produces written narratives of drawings that, as with literature and painting, always maintain their originality because they have "an external condition for mass distribution."[10] (Benjamin, 1969, p. 21).

A written narrative of drawings might absorb masses of people because they are opened frameworks of relations, like Umberto Eco's concept of "Open Work" elaborated during the 1970'[11] (fig. 7).

pagina precedente
Fig. 3 – Morabito V. (2019). *Rethinking Landscape Island alwong the Pearl River Delta.* Hand digital drawing. *China.*

in basso
Fig. 4 – Morabito V. (2019). *Ex Aree Falck, an Idea of space.* Hand digital drawing. *Sesto San Giovanni, Milan, Italy.*
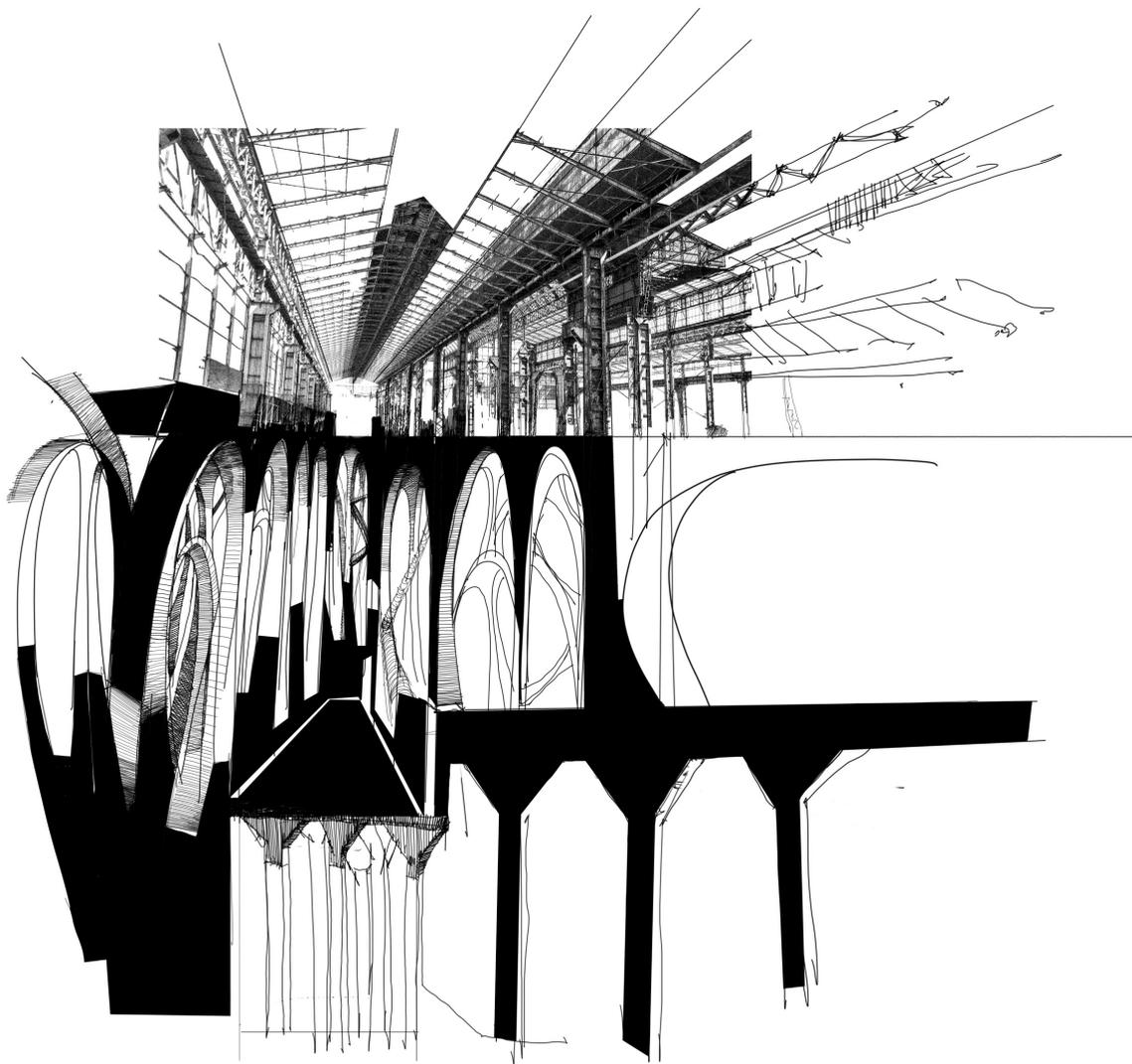
Fig. 5 – Morabito V.+APS+GREENARCO (2020). *The Garden of Cultural Heritage*. International Horticultural Exhibition, 2021. Yangzhou, China. 3D digital image by Xinxin Shen and Xiaochi Tang.
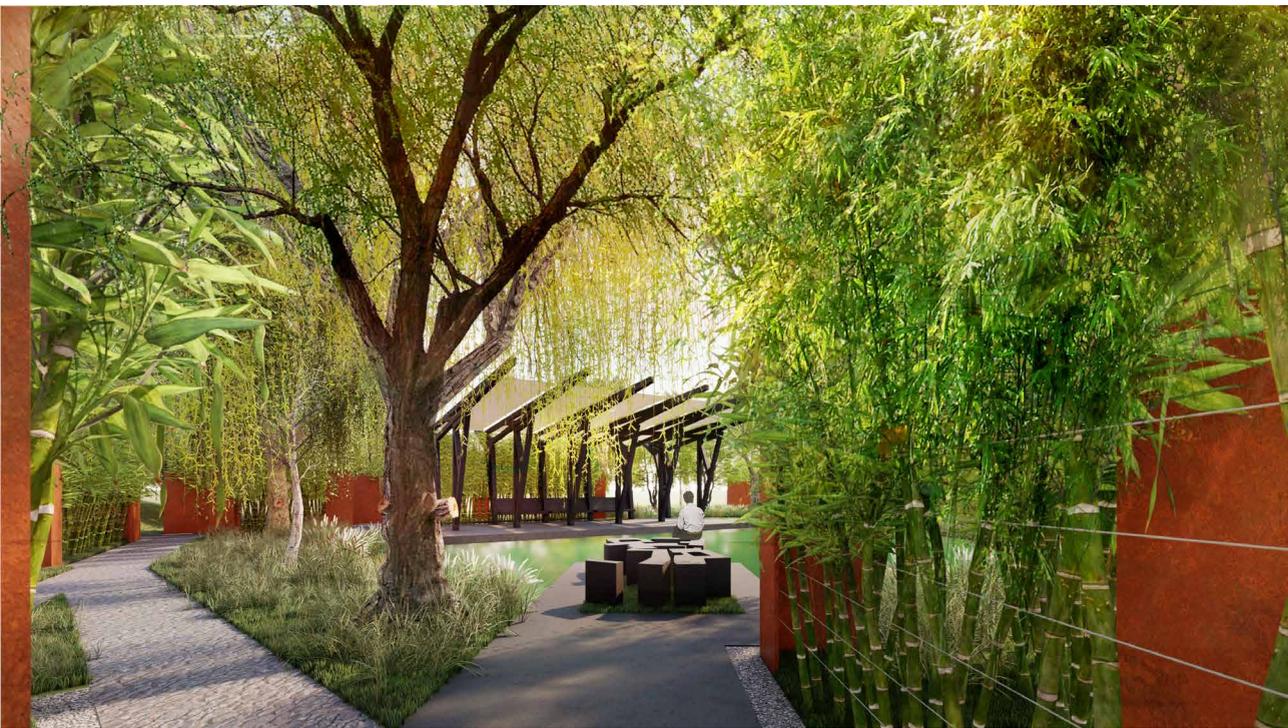
Fig. 6 – Morabito V.+APS+GREENARCO (2020). *The Garden of Cultural Heritage*. International Horticultural Exhibition, 2021. Yangzhou, China. 3D digital image by Xinxin Shen and Xiaochi Tang.
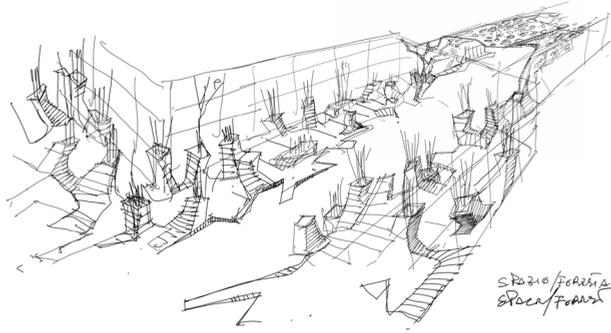
Fig. 7 – Morabito V.+APS+GREENARCO (2020). *Nature calls Nature*. Proposed installation for the European Parliament in Bruxelles, Europe. Drawing by Stefania Condurso.

There are different typologies of drawings generated by the category of originality-concentration: maps of ideas (fig. 8), extended perspectives (fig. 9), dynamic sections, imaginative diagrams, and digital hand drawings (fig. 10), to name a few. They perform to absorb observers, incorporating the necessary changes to better adapt themselves to the context they are acting in.

In this adaptability of ideas and forms, the written narratives of drawings hypothesize scenarios, probe possibilities, intercept contingencies, and adapt imperfections to better respond to the societies and cultural changes, free from any pre-established formal dogma.

Among these images, a few of them touch the landscape architecture tangentially, being images without specific design purposes. Still, they are necessary exercises to move along the boundary between art and landscape architecture, establishing unexpected emotional tensions, generating imagination and creativity. We can say that they are contemporary ornaments[12] of ideas to disseminate and build collective imaginaries for inspirational and innovative spaces (figg. 11-12).
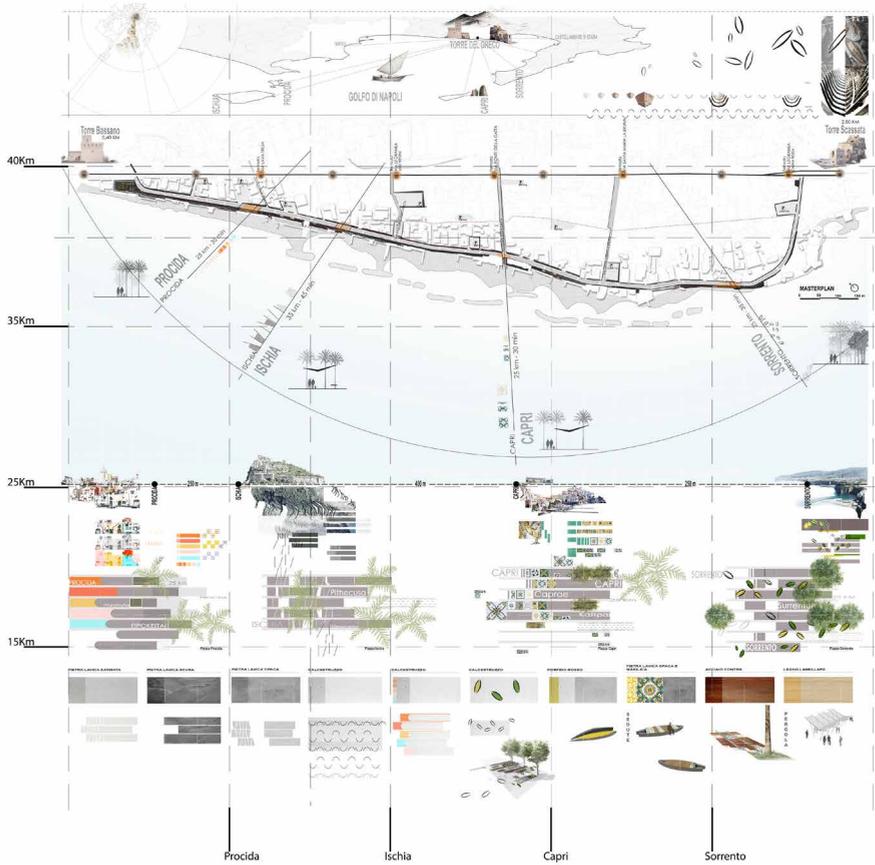
Fig. 8 – Morabito V.+APS (2018). *Map of Ideas. New Water-front in Torre del Greco.* International competition, Torre del Greco, Italy. Drawing by MariaTeresa Nucera and Stefania Condurso.

Fig. 9 – Morabito V.+PennPraxis+APS+dArTe (2018). *View of the urban garden. A new Green Infrastructure for the Ex Aree Falck. Sesto San. Giovanni,* Italy. Drawing by MariaTeresa Nucera and Stefania Condurso.

Fig. 10 – Morabito V. (2019). G*eography of an image.* Hand digital drawing. Torre del Greco, Italy.
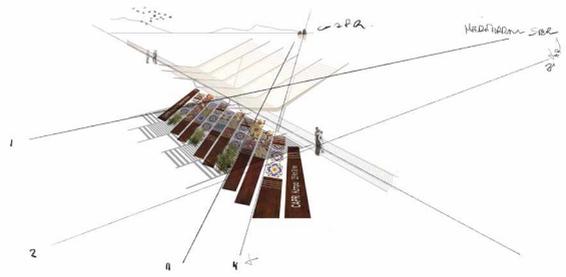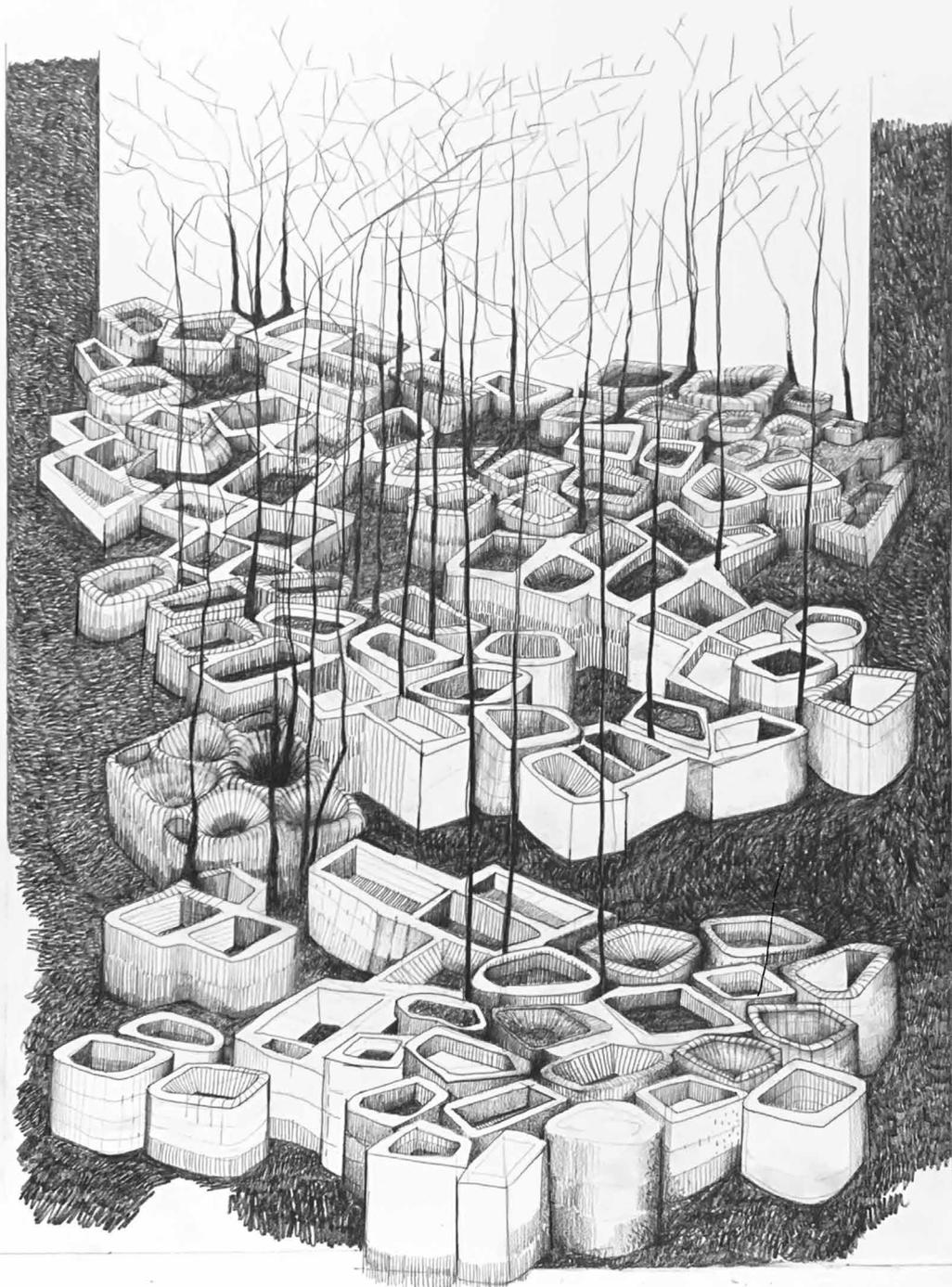
pagina precedente
Fig. 11 – Morabito V. (2019). *Thinking about the city of FES: the tanneries landscapes.* Pencil on Paper. Morocco.
a destra
Fig. 12 – Morabito V. (2020). *The city is Alone n. 2. A post-COVID city.* Hand digital drawing.

Endnotes

[1] According to his theory, the most famous historical parks and gardens changed over the time, creating its own life, many times different from what the designer imagined.

[2] "In these luxurious albums, named for their red morocco leather bindings, Repton perfected a 'before-and-after' technique that was well suited to the aspirations of the era. Incorporating watercolor plates with hinged overlays that could be lifted to reveal the improved condition, Repton's Red Books stand as canonical examples of montage practice in landscape gardening" (Valdheim and Hansen, 2014, p. 58).

[3] <*https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithography*> (12/20)

[4] <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photocopier> (12/20)

[5] <https://oma.eu/projects/parc-de-la-villette> (12/20)

[6] <http://www.intschool.polimi.it/index_20en.html> (12/20)

[7] The historian March Block was the first one theorizing that traces are crucial in generating big historical events.

[8] <https://www.tidalbasinideaslab.org/> (12/20)

[9] "I will devote my first lecture to the opposition between lightness and weight, and will uphold the values of lightness. This does not mean that I consider the virtues of weight any less compelling, but simply that I have more to say about lightness" (Calvino, 1988, p. 3).

[10] Benjamin W. 1969, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations*, edited by H. Arendt, translated by H. Zohn, Schocken Books, New York (ed. orig. 1935). Pag. 21

[11] *Open Work* defines a work of art not as a concluded experience. Eco (1989) explains that new musical works instead consist not in a closed and defined message, not in a uniquely organized form, but the possibility of various organizations entrusted to the initiative of the interpreter. And therefore, they present themselves not as finite works that ask to be relived and understood in a given structural direction. But as open works, which are carried out by interpreters simultaneously as they are aesthetically used. To better explain his concept, he added the example of a road sign; it has a specific purpose and function that does not allow any other interpretation. But musical performances and written drawings have two different aims to reach. Music is related to the performances and the capacity of listeners to be involved. When music and its performance are tremendous, and the listeners are well educated, interested, or intuitively inspired, the aesthetics produce a new significance and a new perception of the original artistic intention. But this new status does not generate any change of the work of art that instead remains in its original physical aspect: a painting remains the same painting, a musical score is written in the same way, a sculpture does not change from its original form. It might be said that contemporary written drawings are between artworks and road signs because they might absorb critics and suggestions after academic discussions, or clients' and citizens' critics and desires, without invalidating their original significance (Morabito, 2019, pp. 55-56.)

[12] The meaning of contemporary 'ornaments' of ideas is related to the human genome. Like the genome, it helps to accumulate traces, symbols, memories, imperfections, and notes into a mental archive. It is possible to pick up some of them to generate new ideas according to contingent needs.

References

Benjamin W. 1969, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations*, edited by H. Arendt, translated by H. Zohn, Schocken Books, New York (ed. orig. 1935).

Koolhaas R. 1966, *Yves Bruner: Landscape Architect*, Birkhauser editor, Berlino.

Calvino I. 1988, *Six memos for the next Millennium*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Corner J., MacLean A.S. 1996, *Taking measures across the American Landscape,* Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

Corner J., Hirsch A. B. (2014), *The Landscape Imagination,* Princeton Architectural Press, New York.

Gareth D. 2011, *Urbanism of Color*, «New Geographies», Vol. 3, Harvard Graduate School of Design and Harvard University Press, Boston.

Eco U. 1989, *The Open Work*, translated by A. Cancogni, President and Fellows of Harvard, United States of America.

Hunt. J. D. 2004*, The Afterlife of Gardens*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

May J. 2019, *Signal. image. architecture: (everything is already an image),* Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, New York.

Morabito V. 2019, *Verbal Drawings: mapping landscape ideas,* in *LAF, Landscape Architecture Frontier, n. 41 "Observation and Representation"*, Peking University, Pechino, Cina.

Mukerji C. 1997, *Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Thorbjörn A. 2008, *From Paper to Park,* in *Representing landscape Architecture*, edited by Mark Treib, Taylor & Francis e-Library.

Valdheim C., Hansen A. (eds) 2014, *Composite Landscape*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Germany.

Valdheim C. Hansen A. 2014, *Introduction: Photomontage and landscape Architecture*, in, *Composite Landscape*, edited by Valdheim C. and Hansen A., Hatje Cantz Verlag, Germany, (pp. 15-21.)