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Landscapers' hymn to reimagined cities

By Barbara Lazear Ascher

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There may be no better place to view the dramatic change in landscape architecture as it responds to post-industrial blight and postmodern aesthetic than at MoMA's exhibition, *Groundswell*.

Videos, models, drawings and photographs show 23 projects that have risen green from industrial wastelands and scenes of war to serve as reminders of Eden and statements on the role of public, urban space. Here, the designers say, is where a culture threatened by overcrowding and isolation can come to express itself - and determine the nature of the surrounding city.

In the first of three galleries, the eye is directed to an aerial view of Keyaki Plaza designed by Peter Walker for the roof of a commercial building above a former rail yard in Saitama City, Japan. The delicate branches of 200 zelkova trees urge our attention upwards as gothic spires once inspired thoughts of heaven. You sense this is sacred space, even before learning that the trees were transplanted from the city's Hikawa shrine.

The ancient ruins of Beirut and the equally ancient conflicts of war are acknowledged in Hadiqat As-Samah (Garden of Forgiveness), by Kathryn Gustafson and Neil Porter. Following the ancient Middle Eastern tradition of allegorical gardens, the designers selected plants from Lebanese warring regions. The dichotomy between what steals and saves the soul of a culture is apparent in Gustafson's design for Shell Petroleum Headquarters in Rueil Malmaison, France. Oil spills. Birds are grounded. Yet green, rolling hills screen the headquarters and conceal an underground car park and utility building. These landscape architects believe nature has power to redeem the evils of industrialisation.

On the glistening plaza of Rotterdam's Schouwburgplein (Theatre Square), designed by Adriaan Geuze, a couple twirl like meditating Sufis. A woman entering Berlin's Invalidenpark (Christophe Girot, Atelier Phusis) wades into the silver of a reflecting pool. Ordinary human beings are elevated as their surroundings give them space.

The honouring goes both ways. To watch the video of Alsop's projected master plan for Bradford in the UK, site of derelict buildings, dwindling population and 1990s race riots, is to imagine the landscape architect as an amused Genesis God. Brush strokes of green and watery blue aid our visualisation. What bird could resist singing here? What pedestrian would not be led on to its paths connecting once warring neighbourhoods?

These projects appear motivated by Thoreau's dictum that if we abandon nature, we abandon ourselves. But this is nature structured to manipulate our psyches back to something we once knew but lost in industrial smog. Even as asphalt stretches around us, even as we breathe polluted air, we are seduced into the landscaped space that, for a redemptive moment, allows us to share the dream of an Edenic past and imagine the cities of the future.

Barbara Lazear Ascher 'Groundswell: Constructing the Contemporary Landscape' is at MoMA, New York, until May 16. Tel +1 212 709 9400

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