

From Landscape Graphics to The Graphic Landscape

Gale Fulton

gfulton@illinois.edu

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Introduction

This essay is an attempt to recover the efficacy of the 'graphic' for landscape architectural design - to move beyond what might best be termed the merely graphic, an ineffectual and symbolic visual language which too often privileges static form and meaning over dynamic form and mood. It is an attempt to escape the narrow functionalisms and 'mere formalisms'(1) of so much contemporary landscape practice in order to embrace the powerful instrumentalisms and affective possibilities which have become available to landscape designers primarily in the last 15 years. Much of this innovation comes from what may at times seem the chaotic and irrelevant world of high architectural theory. But the reality is that this milieu has led to some of the most innovative and compelling discussions about the built environment in this time period, far outpacing, in both sophistication and quantity, the theoretical output in other fields concerned with the built environment such as landscape architecture or urban planning. What follows is an embryonic attempt at synthesis of some of the graphic currents which have been coursing through architectural and landscape urbanistic writings and projects of recent years.

Mere Graphics, Mere Landscapes

If one were to ask contemporary landscape designers about the importance of the graphic in landscape architecture, they would almost certainly receive quizzical looks followed by descriptions of tree symbols or possibly even stippling as a technique to represent certain plan view landscape textures such as grass or concrete. The graphic in landscape design has almost always indicated a representational symbol as opposed to a vivid effect or a diagrammatic strategy that aids in the catalysis and unfolding of a future landscape. But after a ten to twenty year hiatus in which landscape architecture fetishized 'representation' (or was it Representation?) – a postmodernist preoccupation with landscapes that told stories- and then 'performance' – an anti-postmodernist reaction which sought to eliminate all semantic effects in favor of instrumentality - a convergence of new science, theories, and practices point to an opportunity to breathe new life into ideas of the graphic in landscape.

As a point of departure it is useful to think briefly about the term itself.

Dictionary definitions of the word range from qualities such as vivid, clear, and realistic to more objectified conditions such as a diagram or symbol.

These are crucially important differences as it is all too often only the latter understanding of graphic as (static) symbol which is in usage by landscape architecture. These mere graphics need little introduction to those familiar with landscape architectural design and its representation. For landscape architects, the graphic has primarily been understood as merely representational, as having little or no efficacy beyond representing or symbolizing some form of object in landscape such as a tree or even a prairie. Quintessential landscape graphics such as inert tree symbols or ground textures offer little by way of the generative capacities that the infinitely plastic nature of 'the graphic' might afford when understood as a medium more akin to the non-representational painting of the early and mid twentieth century. But instead of the operational or instrumental plasticity that might be unleashed with a reconceptualization of graphic representation in landscape architecture, the discipline seems all too willing to content itself with static, symbolic representations of what are more often than not dynamic processes and

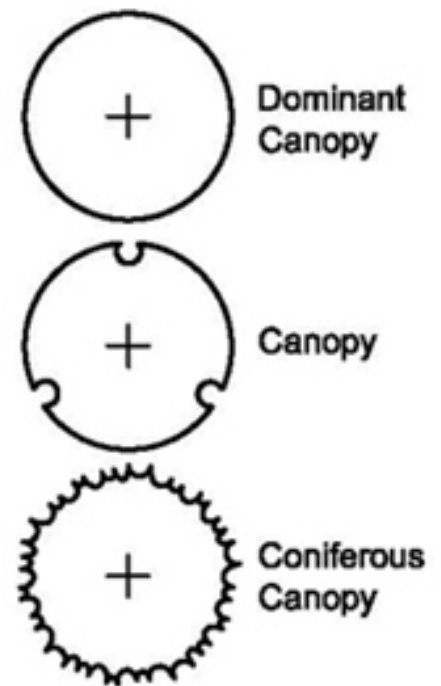


Figure 1
Landscape Architectural Plan Graphics

forms.

Nor has landscape design made enough usage of the other common understanding of the word: that of being especially vivid as one might think of a ‘graphic’ novel or film. A focus on this meaning of the word graphic would shift landscape architectural practices towards a renewed interest in graphic effects or what Sylvia Lavin refers to as “special effects” (2). In suggesting a movement away from preoccupations with being modern in architecture towards a condition of ‘contemporaneity’, Lavin argues that architects would need to identify and activate “the field of exhibitable architectural effects” and especially those effects which are particularly “vivid”(3). It is important to note here that while there may be some discussion of effect in landscape architecture it is generally tied to environmental or remediative effects – those that are objectively measurable, i.e. the quantitative - whereas architects are more often talking about the affective impact that a particular effect might have on a human subject – i.e. the qualitative. While the former is undoubtedly of great importance given the contemporary ecological crisis that we all face, there is also a growing realization that it may well be through the affective power of the latter effects that the former is most powerfully realized. Indeed, it may well be that the seeming naturalness or banality of the merely sustainable is in part due to its failure to create affective, visceral responses in those that see or inhabit such landscapes. (4)

Toward a Landscape of Affect

“What, then, is required to underwrite the So.W.Co conjecture is nothing less than a radical rethinking of the discourse of resistance, one posed in terms of sensations rather than negations... With [a new metracritical foundation] ...a new horizon awaits architecture, a chance to boldly go where it has never gone before: into architectural sensations as resistance, as politics conducted by different means.”
–Jeffrey Kipnis(5)



Figure 2, Court Square Press , Boston, MA, Landworks Studio

This idea of a graphic expansion of traditional landscape techniques and effects is largely ‘underwritten’ by certain theoretical discussions and contemporary practices in architecture. Particularly in the realm of the theoretical, these themes have been developed most clearly, and aggressively, in the writings of so-called ‘post-critical’ theorists and practitioners such as R.E. Somol, Sarah Whiting, Sylvia Lavin, and Jeffrey Kipnis although many others have touched upon aspects of affect, sensation, and projection in a less sustained way or from a disciplinary platform outside the design of the built environment (6). In landscape architecture and landscape urbanism this discussion has centered primarily on the development of infrastructural landscapes capable of functioning (performing) in some way – in the privileging of the how over the what – and oftentimes at the expense of product, what I refer to as mere instrumentality. While there have been some attempts of late to expand the range of this performativity such as Elizabeth Meyer’s recent manifesto calling for an expansion of the sustainable to include increased focus on aesthetics (7), or what Jane Amidon has recently suggested is an increasing interest by landscape designers to engage landscape’s “experiential aspects, often integrating light, water, and weather to elevate formalism into affect” (8), the majority of

performance design of this type has focused on ecological or ‘sustainable’ aspects of a landscape design as they might be quantitatively measured.

In architecture, the most compelling and thorough development of the post-critical discussion is to be found in the writings of architectural theorist R.E. Somol. While there is inadequate space in this essay to trace a full genealogy of the post-critical in architecture, its primary argument can be boiled down to an interest by this camp to shift architectural practices away from an at least forty to fifty year old preoccupation with issues of ‘criticality’ towards practices of ‘projection’ (9). Somol suggests that the critical project in architecture, a project built around a conception of the architectural subject as a ‘reader’ of buildings expected to analyze and interpret architecture, and which is perhaps most easily identified in the career-long preoccupations with the architectural avant-garde of Peter Eisenman, is now exhausted. The alternative is to be found in the ‘projective,’ which is perhaps best exemplified by the work of Rem Koolhaas, and is not preoccupied with a critique of mainstream, bourgeois culture in which it is situated, nor does it rely exclusively on indexing or representing any message in its form, but rather with the creation of alternative forms, spaces, and experiences. As Matthew Allen has written recently in *Log*, this shift in architectural production, what he terms the “speculative sensationist” is one that is characterized by an interest in “affects and atmospheres created by shapes and surfaces.” (10)

Graphic Space

“Hadid’s vertiginous work both transposes and displaces the very horizon that serves as our orientation point in the world. Her curves arc ever-so-slowly as they careen across the canvas or page as if to mock the straight lines that they partly portray, but also to free our intuition from the many regimens of conventional orthogonality to which our modernity has subjected us.”

--Sanford Kwinter(11)

When considering the potentials of graphic space, it may be most informative to begin with the work of avant-garde architect Zaha Hadid. As the aforementioned

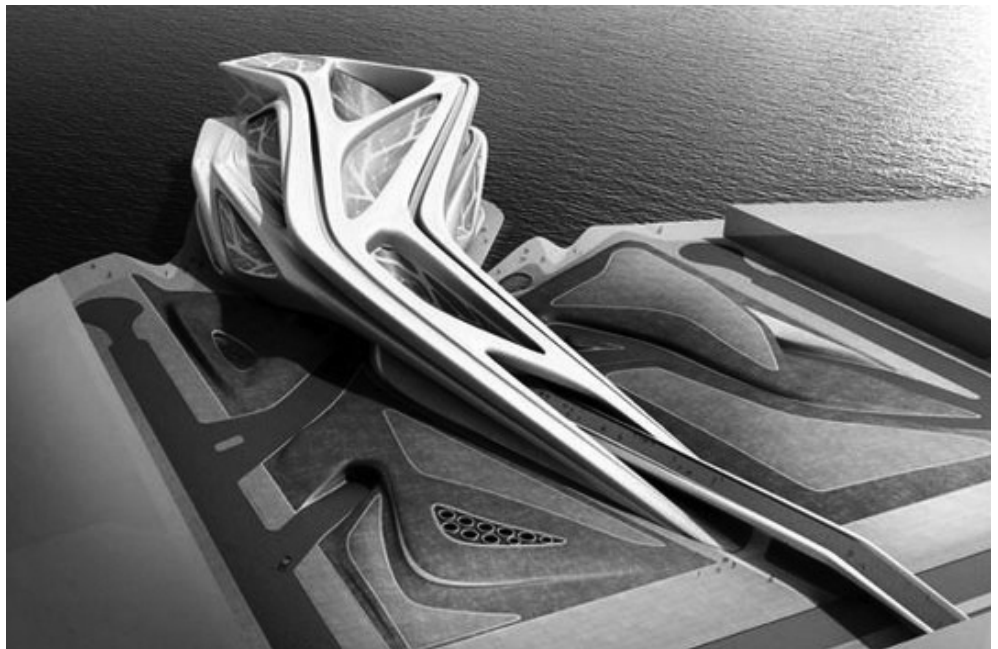


Figure X
Zaha Hadid Architects, Proposed Performing Arts Center, Abu Dhabi,

mentioned quote by Kwinter begins to suggest, Hadid’s work has, for nearly three decades, been an ongoing investigation into the perception, construction, and experience of an alternative form of space which might be understood, at least partially, as graphic. Of particular interest in an essay which is concerned with notions of the graphic as both a representational tool or medium (as in a drawing or computer model) and a quality or effect of a built environment which results from such a representation, is the evolution of Hadid’s own method from one graphic medium to another. Patrik Schumacher, in his book, *Digital Hadid: Landscapes in Motion*, discusses the way that the drawing has allowed for architectural advances throughout history. Critical for Hadid, and one assumes, many late twentieth century architects such as Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman, and Thom Mayne among others, is “the compositional liberation achieved by abstract art in the first decade of the 20th century” (12). It was at this point that modern architecture was able to free itself from its representational impulse and “to build upon the legacy of modern abstract art as the conquest of a previously unimaginable realm of constructive

freedom” (13). For Schumacher, it was only this passage into complete abstraction, into total flatness one might argue, that allows Hadid to escape the limiting traditions of architectural representation and its built counterpart and enter into a space of totally “free creation”(14). “Only on this basis, as explicitly graphic maneuvers, do the design maneuvers gain enough fluidity and freedom to play. They have to be set loose, shake off the burden, to always already mean something determinate”(15). It was through this complete immersion into a world of graphic abstraction that Hadid was able to move beyond conventional notions of space and form. Of course, this phase of the ‘design’ process, if design in this case is even the right term – pure graphic experimentation may be more accurate - was followed by a rigorous process of mapping or translation back into the world of built form. This, according to Schumacher, was where Hadid was potentially most ‘audacious’ in that she fearlessly transposed her graphic abstractions into “equally fluid tectonic systems”(16) and thereby moved beyond the ‘paper architecture’ aspersions leveled by her contemporaries and critics alike to actualize architectural space (or is it landscape?) unlike any seen before.

What landscape architects can learn from Hadid’s truly landscape Architecture is then twofold. First, landscape designers must learn from Hadid’s process that the plasticity of abstract representation, the graphic as it is being called here, has in no way been emptied of its generative content and should be revisited and extended in order to join Hadid in attempting to generate new and affective forms. It is arguable that this project has never been easier to carry out given the incredible diversity of media (especially in the form of software) that designers now have access to. That being said, it is also worth remembering (and carefully re-examining) that much of Hadid’s early graphic work took place in the medium of painting, and as Schumacher has attested, there was a long and rigorous process of “selection and interpretation” (17) – a less rigorous, ‘anything goes’ approach is unlikely to yield significant results. Second, landscape designers can look to the built works of Hadid, especially those that most effectively blur the boundaries between traditional definitions of architecture and landscape, and learn from their provocative physical effects. Neither of these programs requires an exclusion of programs of environmental sustainability or social sensitivity as critics of avant-gardist work in any field are so often eager to claim. Instead, the overall landscape project is elevated to new heights of cultural importance through its ability to enfold complex social and ecological programs into innovative and provocative forms.

Graphic Strategy

Another contemporary capitalization on the plasticity of the graphic is in the form of what I refer to as graphic strategy. This usage of the graphic is also closely associated with the diagram as it has been deployed in contemporary architectural discussions since the early 1990’s. In this regard, the theoretical development of the graphic by R.E. Somol as it pertains to the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)/Bruce Mau/ Petra Blaisse competition entry for Downsview Park in Toronto is a crucial stepping off point (18). The now infamous ‘green dots’ that were deployed in the OMA/Mau/Blaisse “Tree City” scheme were leveraged by Somol as a strategy for a post-critical urbanism capable of meeting the ambiguities, contradictions, and complexities of contemporary urbanism on their own terms. While much of his writing on the subject since this essay has dealt more specifically with architectural figures (especially elevational), his interest in the Green Dots seems to have arisen from a more

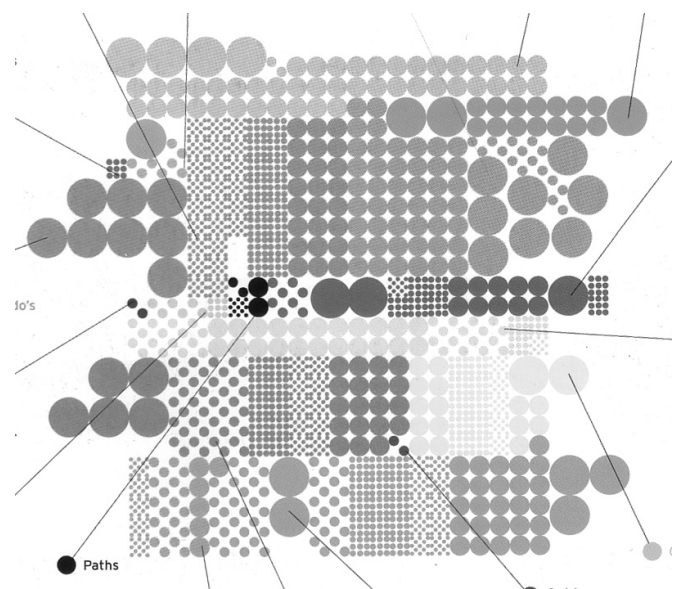


Figure X,
OMA/ Bruce Mau, Program Growth Diagram, Downsview Park Competition,

program-driven diagrammaticism, based largely on the potential of the plan, which is undoubtedly of utmost importance to urbanism and landscape architecture.

Building upon earlier logo-work of Rem Koolhaas, Somol recasts the graphic at Downsview as an architectural or urbanistic device with potentials that far outstrip its more common usage as mere symbol. Somol discusses the OMA/Mau/Blaisse scheme in terms of the diagram which has become a logo. Comparing the Tree City scheme to the more traditional site-specific and formal landscape strategy entered by Field Operations, Somol argues that,

“While the former team deploys a surfeit of notational diagrams – rich, dense, specific, and elaborate – the latter stutters the iteration of a single gesture – ascetic, arid, generic, primitive: the graphic equivalent to Tourette’s syndrome.” (19)

Here we see a major departure from the traditional usage of the graphic in landscape architecture which is from the specific to the generic. As Somol suggests, the absolute genericity of the graphic for Tree City, its ability to be tree, space, building, pond, and marketing logo, allows it the freedom to become operational, infrastructural, and instrumental as opposed its more traditional usage in which it generally succumbs to a merely symbolic role of standing in for a specific landscape material or object such as a tree, bench, or building. He continues,

“In fact...the condensation of the diagram to a logo is necessary precisely as an attractor for disparate possible associations and developments. A vague specificity permits future diversity.” (20)

In this way, the Tree City scheme leverages the “performative immediacy” of the graphic as a strategy for both the catalysis of, and adaptation to an uncertain future. This, Somol argues, is a very different tactic than the “wait and see” contingency’ opted for by other competition teams (as well as a whole generation of ‘process’ landscape architects and urbanists), in which ‘natural’ operations such as seed dispersal, rhizomatic colonization, varying levels of saturation, etc, are employed to facilitate an ‘out of control’ landscape ecology(21). Its difference lies in what Somol terms a ‘vague specificity’ which, while seemingly a paradoxical or nonsensical approach to urban or architectural form, is actually indicative of a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the complexities of contemporary urbanization. Such strategies, Somol seems to suggest, eclipse the rigid masterplans of twentieth century urbanists in favor of flexible, nomadic, potentially even parasitic tactics better equipped to simply participate in urbanism today.

The conflation of diagram, graphic, and logo in the Tree City scheme demonstrates the elasticity of the graphic as a strategic instrument for landscape. The green dot serves simultaneously as a logo, which in its iconic and/or imagistic abilities is even to be deployed by the OMA/Mau team as a marketing tool, or perhaps more appealing to some, as an advocacy device which goes beyond the traditional role of the designer as someone who simply drops off a formal plan to be materialized by someone else and instead provides park organizers with a clear and simple graphic around which to build their campaign. What this strategic approach to urbanism demonstrates, and should signal for landscape architects and urbanists, is a pragmatic understanding of how the world works now coupled with a willingness to simply ‘get in the game.’ The aim of such strategies is not to utopically rewrite the rules or to critique the process from a privileged position outside the mainstream, but rather to just jump in, to embrace fully the uncertainties facing large-scale, long-term public landscape development today.

Graphic Surface

The last category of graphic expansion to be discussed is the graphic surface. This category is closely aligned and at times overlapping with the earlier category of graphic space and describes that experience of architectural space or materiality which is achieved through what is best termed ‘special effects’. As Sylvia Lavin has sug-

gested, the use of such special effects is a way for architecture to escape a limiting and nostalgic “modernity” and achieve a more sensational and speculative “contemporaneity” (22). Lavin argues for an updated understanding and usage of materials that allows for the creation of effects which are “detachable from the logic of causality.” In this way, the effect takes on an immediacy that reduces “apperception” in favor of sensation (23). She uses the example of modernist transparency which was crucially linked to the properties of glass, while contemporary “luminescence and plasticity” are less obviously linked to their material progenitors. For this reason,

“their effectiveness is dissipated by enhanced legibility but is enhanced by dissipated and distracted vision. Effects are dissembling, provisional, and contemporary. The best effects are special effects, and contemporaneity relies on them. Special effects are especially conditional and experimental; like an avocado kitchen counter or a Replicant, they sense their impending demise” (24).

The importance of this discussion for the concept of graphic surface in landscape is that many of the effects of the type that Lavin discusses are a result of new technologies available to architects today that are often found in some relationship to the surface or ‘skin’ of an architectural element, and it is precisely as ‘thickened surface’ that some of the most important contemporary landscapes have been conceptualized(25). Architect Greg Lynn precedes Lavin’s message with his discussion of ‘surface effects’ at the 1999 Any Conference titled Anymore (26). Lynn relates the newfound interest in special effects to advances in digital software which allow for a facility with complex surfaces nearly impossible with more traditional architectural representational traditions such as plan and section. Additionally, or perhaps because of this shift in technique, comes a move away from “typology, which is fixed” as a primary generator of form to “traits, which are variable and interchangeable” (27). Traits, then, contribute to the generation of special effects outside their conventional filmic understanding, through the mechanism of “the addition of features and contours in a surface continuum. Traits can be manifest without respect to the typologies in which they occur” (28).

Given that this newfound interest in special effects is primarily being experimented with and developed by architects, it remains of particular interest in this essay, due to its primary goal being the elaboration of the graphic for landscape effects, to attempt translations where possible of compelling architectural theory, material and technique into more specifically landscape formats. Lynn’s work is especially relevant in this regard because so much of his architecture resembles the fluid topographies so often found in landscape. Additionally, two recent essays by other architectural theorists offer landscape architects compelling ways to think about the potentials of landscape surface in ways that have yet to be engaged.

In his discussion of the ‘Supergraphic,’ architectural theorist John McMorrough traces a history of the Supergraphic which he describes as “those big arrows, numbers, or words painted on walls and seen throughout the late 1960’s and early 1970’s” (29). While much of the essay focuses on the discursive ‘coverage’ of the Supergraphics phenomenon in the architectural literature at the time, there are also instances when a landscape architectural misreading of sorts might yield ways that techniques of the Supergraphic might (re)inform landscape as well as architecture. One of these is in the high impact to cost ratio that may be achieved through such a minimal intervention as the addition of a thin coat of paint. As McMorrough states “Supergraphics made sense as an installation constituting only a depth of a few



Figure 5, Gene Davis, Franklin’s Footpath, Philadelphia, PA, 1972

millimeters of paint and, because the technical requirements of application were so minimal and the necessary capital expenditure so low, it was possible to have a student operate as instigator, designer, and actual maker of the projects” (30). Such a pragmatic approach is easily translatable to landscape work primarily because some of the materials which are oftentimes considered to be uniquely landscape, such as vegetation and soil, are incredibly cheap compared to many of their more architectural counterparts. One has only to think of the graphic landscape treatments, oftentimes at least partially effected through bold swaths of monochromatic flowers or foliage, of Roberto Burle-Marx or West 8 to see if not a landscape equivalent to Supergraphics, then at least a close relative.

Significantly for this discussion of the Supergraphic in the context of the post-critical, McMorrough also points out that the discourse surrounding the Supergraphic was too quickly overshadowed by what is an arguably lesser form of postmodernism that relied more exclusively on signification as opposed to what might be referred to as a more ‘literal’ reading via minimalism (31). McMorrough says that this eclipse of one form of Supergraphics for another represents “an insufficiently explored virtuality within [its] development” and adds that “Supergraphics is one case in which the aspirations and techniques of representation are used, but in a manner both constitutive of and resistant to the aporia prescribed within the applied postmodern reading of its significance (nee representation). The history of such techniques shows how representation in architecture can be understood, not in terms of its signification, but of its application.” (32)

The last analogy of use in expanding the idea of graphic surface in landscape architecture originates in painting, specifically in what Jeffrey Kipnis refers to as “the cunning of the cosmetic” (33) found in the serial paintings of Dutch painter Philip Akkerman. Kipnis situates Akkerman’s work in line with painters such as David Reed and Jonathan Lasker, both of whom have investigated the potentials of the “repeating motif” for contemporary painting (34). Because Akkerman had, at the time of Kipnis’ writing in 2005, completed more than 2000 self-portraits, which shifts his work away from mere repetition to the creation of repeating motif, Kipnis argues that Akkerman, similar to Reed and Lasker, “shift(s) the question away from the ontological What is painting? to the performative What can painting do? and to extend that latter question to What else can painting do? and finally to What else can painting do that no other discipline can do as well?” (35)

Akkerman distances his project from other self-portraiture projects throughout history through the sheer number he has created – effectively creating a repeating motif instead of an isolated work to be understood intellectually or ‘meditated upon’. Instead, Kipnis believes that Akkerman’s work demonstrates “a study in the prodigious superficiality of painting – not a lie, because a lie would mean there was some truth to be told – but an etude in the cunning of the cosmetic, in surface, in flatness, in the properties of pigment, in much that Greenberg called forth from painting.” (36) Is it possible that there are lessons here for how landscape architecture might engage the repeating motif of suburban America?



Figure 6, Philip Akkerman

Conclusion

In closing we might ask ourselves of landscape architecture and design, after Kipnis: What is it that landscape can do that no other discipline can do as well? I would argue that this does not necessarily require landscape to retreat to some past definition of disciplinarity but rather to attempt a form of extreme disciplinarity as has been suggested by others (37). Such a move would prevent a self-defeating search for an authenticity or medium specificity that quite possibly never existed for landscape architecture in favor of a more robust and affirmative project which seeks to fully explore what landscape is capable of accomplishing. But this does not mean that we should not look critically at the techniques and effects that have served us well in the past and work to contemporize them according to new methods and ways of thinking. In this way, a return to, and expansion of, the graphic, as space, strategy, and surface, might just lead to an effect worth causing.

References:

1. Sanford Kwinter, "Who's Afraid of Formalism?" in *Phylogenesis: FOA's Ark* (Actar, 2004). 96.
2. Sylvia Lavin, "In a Contemporary Mood," in *Hunch* 6/7, (2003), 294-5.
3. Ibid. 295.
4. Elizabeth Meyer, "Sustaining Beauty: The Performance of Appearance," in *Landscape Architecture*, Vol. 98, No. 10, (2008).
5. Jeffrey Kipnis, "Is Resistance Futile?" in *Log* 5, (2005), 107.
6. Some might argue that Kipnis is in fact at odds with the post-critical 'cabal' in part due to his long-standing interest and affirmation of the Eisenman project which has been used by Somol as the quintessential critical project. But a careful reading of Kipnis demonstrates that he is certainly interested in the affective, and possibly has been for longer than, or as long as, any of the others. Kipnis actually described Eisenman's work as a 'plunge into an architecture of post-critical sensibilities...' See Jeffrey Kipnis, "P-Tr's Progress," in *El Croquis* 83, (1997). Elsewhere in this essay, Kipnis discusses the importance of affect in Eisenman's work in projects that long predate much of the discussions of the newly post-critical.
7. Meyer, "Sustaining Beauty: The Performance of Appearance," in *Landscape Architecture*, Vol. 98, No. 10, (2008).
8. Jane Amidon in an email to the author – 12 December, 2007.
9. There is a growing literature on the post-critical. For an excellent introduction to the concept see R.E. Somol and Sarah Whiting, "Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism," *Perspecta* 33 (2002): 72-77.
10. Matthew Allen, "Speculative Sensationalists," in *Log* 10, (2007).
11. Sanford Kwinter, "Rational/Irrationalism," in *Far From Equilibrium: Essays on Technology and Design Culture* (New York: Actar, 2008). 159.
12. Patrik Schumacher, *Digital Hadid: Landscapes in Motion* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2004). 15.
13. *ibid.* 16.
14. *Ibid.* 16.
15. *Ibid.* 16.
16. *Ibid.* 17.
17. *Ibid.* 16.
18. For an excellent overview of the Downsview competition, see Julia Czerniak, editor, *Case: Downsview Park Toronto* (New York: Prestel, 2001).
19. *Ibid.* 131.
20. *Ibid.* 131.
21. At the root of this discussion of 'wait and see contingency' for landscape architecture are questions about artificial natures and the authority of nature. This has been a perennial problem for landscape architecture at least

since Olmsted and one that deserves a much deeper level of inquiry than it has thus far received. Recent projects of significance with regard to this problem are the Field Operations and Mathur/da Cunha schemes at Freshkills as well as StossLU's Mt. Tabor competition strategy.

22. Lavin, 294-5.

23. Ibid. 295.

24. Ibid. 295.

25. For more examples on contemporary surface effects in architecture see Praxis 9: Expanding Surface, (2008).

26. Greg Lynn, "Surface Effects," in *Anymore* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), p. 233.

27. Ibid. 233.

28. Ibid. 233.

29. John McMorrough, "Blowing the Lid off Paint: The Architectural Coverage of Supergraphics," in *Hunch 11*, (2007): 65.

30. Ibid. 67,69.

31. Ibid. 73.

32. Ibid. 73.

33. Jeffrey Kipnis, "Some thoughts on contemporary paintings in the hope that analogies to architecture might be drawn..." in *Hunch 9*, (2005) p. 31.

34. Ibid. 29.

35. Ibid. 31.

36. Jane Amidon, "Big Nature" lecture, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, April, 2008.