The Lawn Game: Programming the Non-Static View

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In his article, "Is Landscape Architecture?," David Leatherbarrow describes a critical transformation in the modern construction of ground away from a tradition of a singular vantage as a constructed image. Leatherbarrow writes, 'no interpretation has come under more forceful criticism... Instead of images or pictures, contemporary landscapes are intended to offer effects, which are not matters of form, but the visible aspects of operations." He suggests the practice of landscape as an image was rejected in the modern era because it falsified the "terrain as static...neglecting the fact that it is always inescapably developmental, dynamic or metabolic in character." Leatherbarrow draws attention to the contemporary critique of the pre-modern landscape designer, whose interest in the pictorial ignored the alive and ever-changing nature of vegetation and earth. Hence the contemporary landscape designer decries the notion that landscape should demonstrate itself as driven by life and death — in the form of ecology on a site, or of social programming that would bring form to design. As such, the discipline of landscape during the modern era formed an indictment on practices of designing through the use of a picture plane and stationary view point in favor of a planometric organizations of ground effects.

Figure 1. 'Topiary Models' from the book, "*Decoration interieure et hardins de Versailles et autres endroits*", anonymous, France 18th century

THE PRE-MODERN VERTICAL PICTURE PLANE

The tradition of landscape as a vertical image is largely a history of procedures involving the manicure and control of nature as a figural form. 'Toparius' — a creator of places, was designated to the gardener who created sculptural, abstract, and representational forms from densely planted shrubs and trees [Figure 1]. Sculpting the creation of these figural worlds created a series of spaces and opportunities for movement throughout the garden. Often these objects would be anthropomorphized within their context, growing larger in presence and form, year after year, requiring maintenance and care, in association with its caretakers. Topiaries were considered family heirlooms, passed down from generation to generation based on their slow growth.In 1713, however, Alexander Pope wrote the satirical essay, 'Verdant Sculpture' mocking the popularity of topiary, causing massive eradication from fashionable
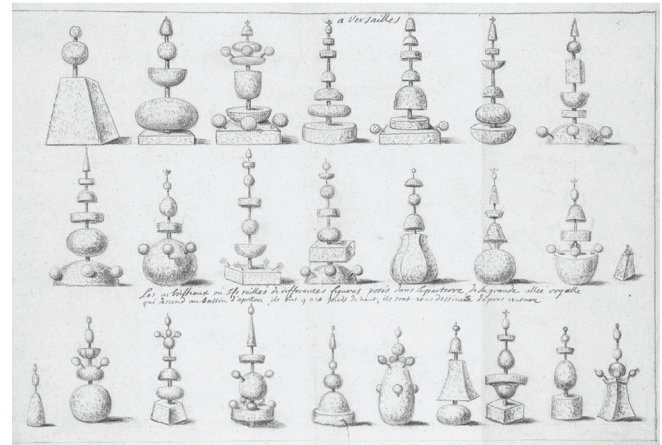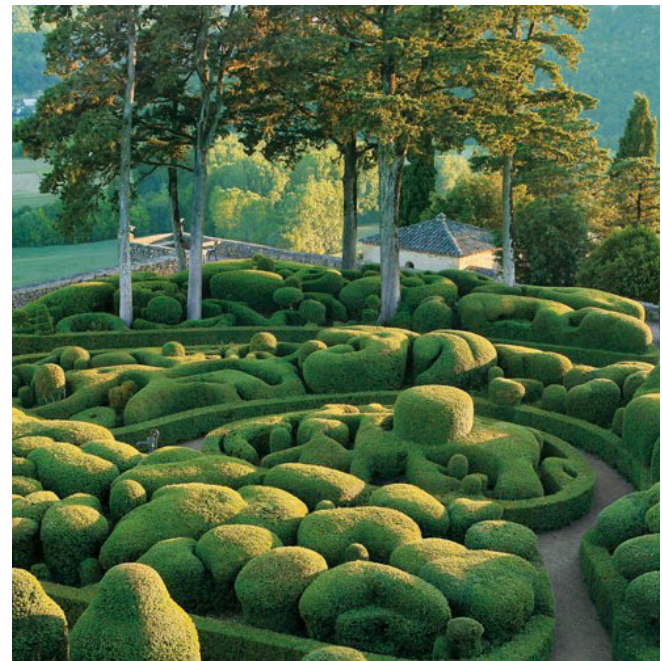

Figure 2. Les Jardins de Marqueyssac - Dordogne - France © Laugery

Figure 3. Lawn Game elevation, Image by © op.AL + And.Either.or

landscape. Only to be brought back decades later as figural and abstract, once again in the garden, as exemplified in the garden of Marqueyssac, in Vézac, France [Figure 2]. Head gardener Julien de Cerval groomed 150,000 boxwood plants, "to mimic the surrounding hills of the Dordogne Valley, or when viewed from above, the backs of grazing sheep." The formal arrangement and overhead vantage of parterre is an abstract plan configuration of topiary. As a means of organizing sections of the garden, these geometries created a tapestry of plant material within an estate, as well as spatial configuration for movement and play. Lawn play historically took on a variety of active and passive arrangements, often including throwing, rolling, and scoring.

THE HORIZONTAL PROGRAMMED PICTURE PLANE
Although the modern discourse of landscape has been eschewed the stationary point and view plane, it could be argued the landscape as an image never truly subsided but merely changed in its perspective. The picture plane of the aerial, satellite, and more recently the drone, present a new arena of fixed moments within landscape architecture. A prime example of this tendency in contemporary practice is evident in the James Corner Field Operations Navy Yards Central Green in Philadelphia [Figure 5]. This project's organization is driven by a vantage point provided for by the new high rise office developments that paid for its production (not unlike royalty looking out over a series of french parterres). The landscape graphically creates a patterned picture plane coincident with the horizontal surface, in which the individually programmed rings remain highly graphic, while the water, ecology, and visitor play out within, as a backdrop. This practice of design through horizontal terrain as a graphic field of measured play, parallels traditions and practices of twentieth-century spectator sports, where the field becomes a static backdrop for the elements of game play, to be both performed and spectated..
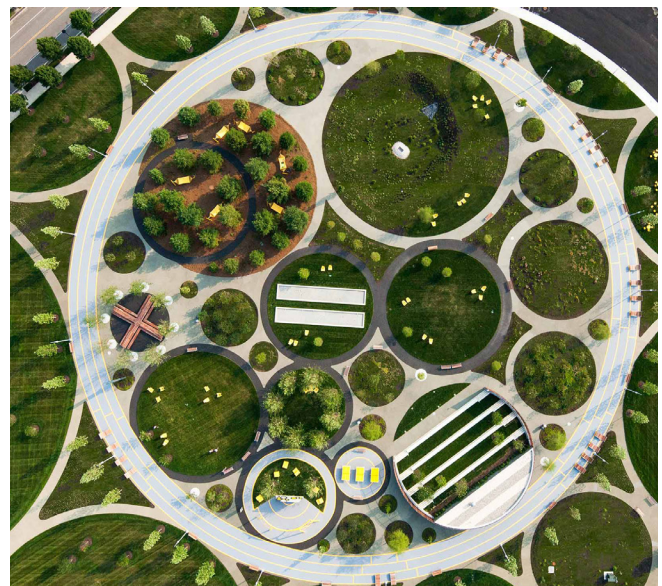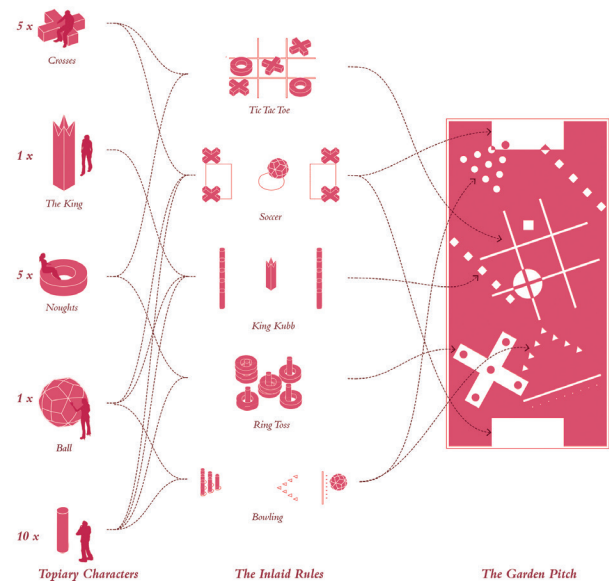

Figure 4. Game rules and scenarios, Image by © op.AL + And.Either.or

Figure 5. Navy Yard Central Green

LAWN GAME - THE NON STATIC PICTURE PLANE

Another means of addressing the modern critique of the 'static-image' would be to focus less on the 'image' and more on the notion of the static character of images typically deployed. Contemporary landscape designers can reconnect themselves with this tradition of play through the production of landscape form, as a series of moving images. In this way, the project seeks to create a hyper landscape, or many landscapes in one.

"Lawn Game" grafts two static spectacle traditions into a new proposal informing a dynamic field in which the image of the landscape, not its players, are in constant flux [Figure 4]. The "Lawn Game," first features the play pieces from the scenographic elevation and distant view as the historical topiary within a static garden — while through their subtle movements it becomes clear something odd is afoot [Figure 3]. The plan and interior occupation makes evident these topiary objects invite interaction through their construction. Topiaries are wrapped and sewn with panels of field turf — a material conventionally used as lawn cover on a recreational sports pitch — overlaid on low density geo-foam insulation — typically employed as land form fill. Panels are seamed together through roped stitching akin to the tectonics of play-ball construction. The play pitch utilizes the artificially colored synthetic astro-turf inscribing the ground with an ordered set of lines, rendered with an illusionary drop-shadow to create a deep reverse parterre effect [FIgure 6].

This project contributes to a history of imagination and public activity and play in the art of the garden through development of a hybrid landscape typology, as both a formal view oriented - construct and active sport. "Lawn Game" seeks to strike a fluid territory between the formal geometric landscape, and active programming, by creating a moving image of ground and park, supported by program that can also be adjusted, manicured and curated from the point of view [Figure 7]. By establishing a new ground as a means of interplay between sport and garden, participant and landscape, lawn games results in a shifting territory of play. Through lifting, stacking, rolling, and knocking, these topiaries demonstrate the active character of landscape absent in both static and pictorial aesthetic of its past and the programmatic nature of the present that defines the contemporary field.
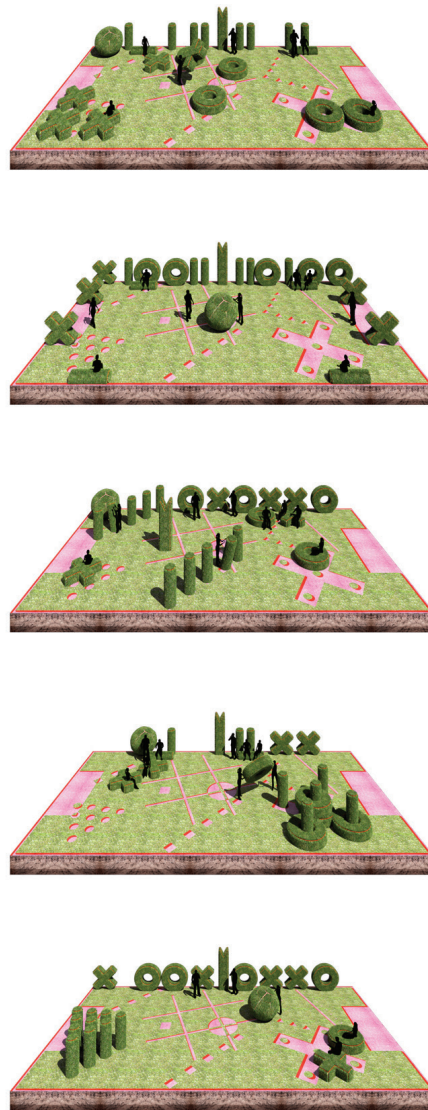

Figure 6. Game scenarios © op.AL 2018 + And.Either.or

ENDNOTES

1.   David Leatherbarrow, "Is Landscape Architecture?," in Is Landscape...?: Essays
      on the Identity of Landscape, ed. Gareth Doherty and Charles Waldheim
      (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016), 327–37.

Figure 7. Above, Plan view of the Lawn Game pattern and objects. Below, Games at play. Images by © op.AL 2018 + And.Either.or