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BUREAU BAS SMETS

Founded 2007, Brussels, Belgium
Interview with Bas Smets

Scale and Scope

Our projects range from one private garden a year to territorial projects, as we call them, where we are asked to develop a vision for the coming thirty or forty years. We also work at the master planning scale on the extensions of existing cities. And then there is the scale of public space where we actually build the projects that we design. I just did a movie set as well, so there is no distinction in scale or in commission. When it's interesting we do it, and the scale doesn't matter. We work similarly on the very big scale as we work on the very small scale.

Approach

I think landscape architecture above all is about seeing and understanding the territory. There is a landscape theory that says that land becomes landscape through a cultural process. The most important element is the way you look at the land and the way you imagine a possible landscape to be made with that land. There's a quotation of Oscar Wilde's that says, "life imitates art far more than art imitates life," and I truly believe you first have to see something before it can become a reality. One example, also from Oscar Wilde, is that the mist on the Thames in London has existed for millions of years because it's a natural phenomenon, but it was not until Turner painted it that we started to see it.

The most important element is the way you look at the land and the way you imagine a possible landscape to be made with that land.

So in landscape projects it's really about revealing something that is there but has remained un-seen. Once you've seen it and you've understood the different ways of seeing it, you can make it become reality. This act of revealing is based on a reading of the existing structures and elements. It's based on a critical reading of scientific knowledge and on a precise reading of the context.

The combination of those readings reveal an image of a potential landscape that is hidden in the actual land. It is about imagining this ideal landscape and revealing the possibility of it.

Tools

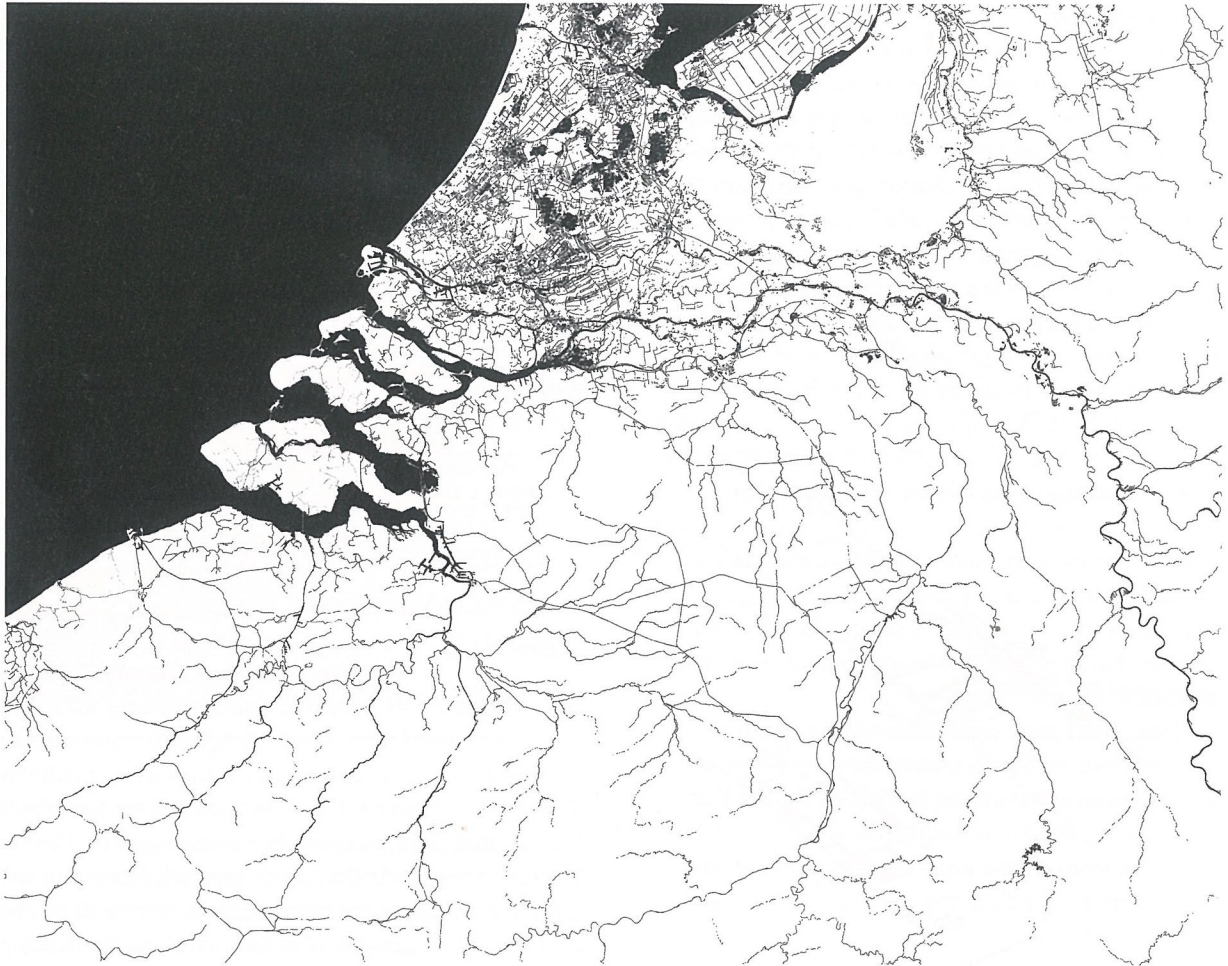
The main tool is cartography. We hardly ever use the plans that we are given. We redraw them, based on aerial photographs, as provided by Google Earth. We redraw all the components, layer by layer. For example, in our proposal for Moscow, we were not given any plans. We redraw all the trees of the city, all the roads, all the built-up space, all the infrastructure. It's like those guys who went out on their boats and discovered the Americas. Every time they would see a coastline they would redraw it. I think there is a basic action in drawing that makes a new kind of reality possible.

The hand questions the mind and provides drawings to the eyes. So in a way we really try to make a kind of X-ray of all the different layers of the landscape and then combine those layers to see what could possibly become a landscape structure. What is most interesting about this approach is that it's always based on reality, on what is already there. So this revealing and subsequent discovery of the landscape is easily shared with our clients since it's based on the existing situation.

Challenges

What is very challenging in Belgium is that my job doesn't really exist. We have a great tradition of gardeners, but projects on the scale of the landscape itself are fairly new. This is not the case in Germany, in France or in the Netherlands where the practice is much older and where they actually have large scale landscapes. Belgium lies in between the man-made landscape of the Netherlands and the strong natural landscapes of France and Germany. The lack in topographical differences has resulted in a lack of large landscapes in Belgium.

Five years ago, when I'd win a competition the client wouldn't really know what I had won. So in the beginning I often found myself in the position where I had to explain what they had just commissioned—what I was going to do and what my role as a landscape architect



was all about. The first job I got, a study on the territory of Flanders, I actually named it *Strategies for a land without a landscape*.

Future Challenges and Opportunities

I think the biggest challenge is that the whole world has become one single landscape, one single project. We started off with a kind of wild and dangerous world, and we created our first gardens to make a comfortable and safe environment. Those gardens developed into cities and those cities became landscapes, and more and more

elements of this formerly wild nature became part of our design in a way, part of our desire to give it a form that we like. And now with globalization it seems there is hardly any wilderness left, everything has become one continuous landscape. The biggest challenge will be to overcome the boundaries and imagine one single landscape for the planet as a whole.

Landscape can really have a very important role, because it can show you what reality could look like. It is all about possibilities, growth, and becoming.