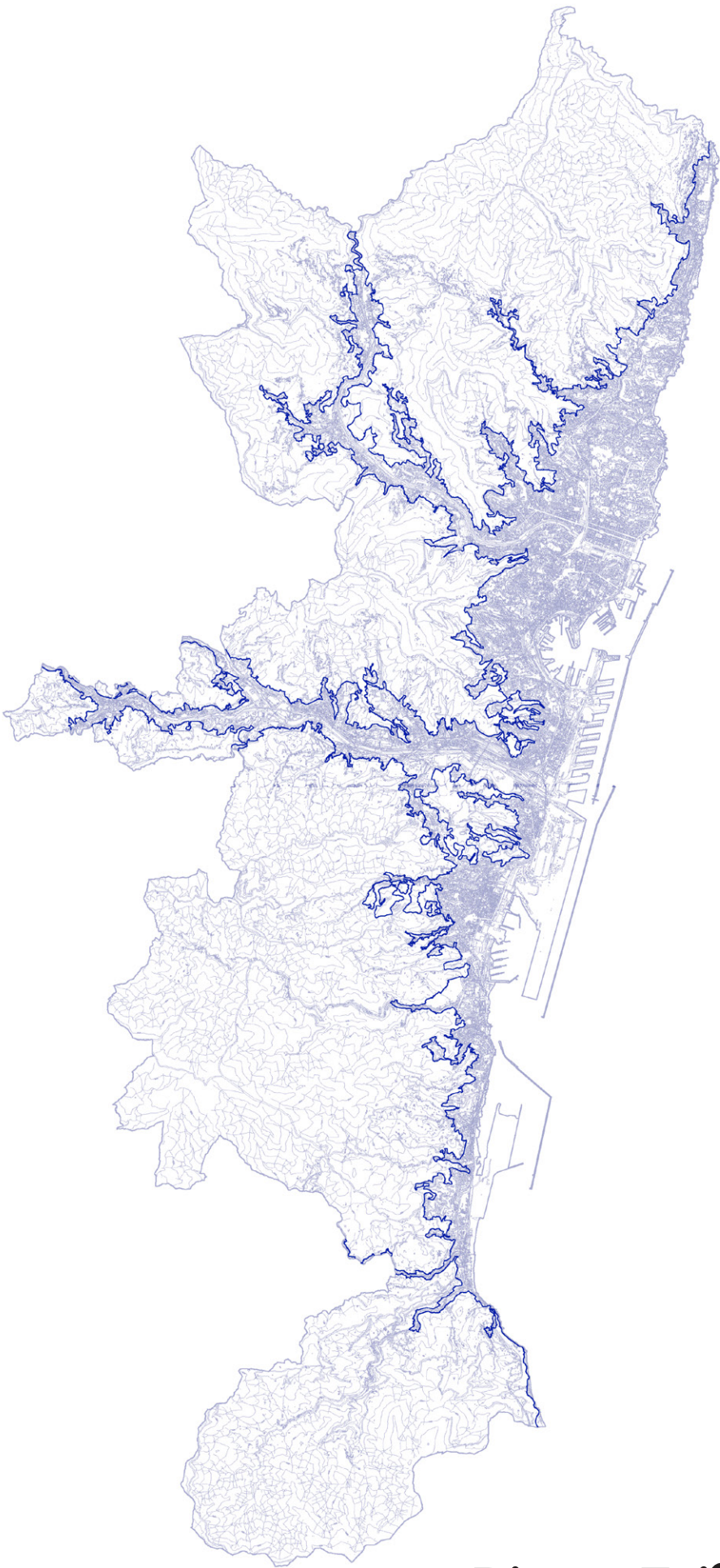


**Fringe Fictions:  
The Case of La Linea Verde**



**Bianca Eriksson**

Tightly wedged between the mountainous territory of the Apennines and the Ligurian Sea; a lack of space and difficult terrain has been the persistent condition steering Genoa's development. Following the fate of many post-industrial European cities, Genoa's most recent history is marked by a phase of spatial contraction, determined by demographic decline and deindustrialization. In an effort to shift the centrifugal nature of Genoa's urban development towards urban regeneration, *La Linea Verde* is conceived as an adaptation strategy to deal with the shrinking state of the city<sup>1</sup>. Translated 'The Green Line', it represents the visual and physical demarcation between the built city and the green surroundings in which it's situated. One might say, between nature and artifice. Despite its intangible nature and absence of physical shape, the line is an attempt to retrieve the lost form of the city, fixating its contours in a specific moment of civic time. In city planning terms the line marks the boundary beyond which the city cannot expand; allowing no new urban settlements or development of supporting infrastructures to be planned beyond the line.

*Fringe Fictions: The Case of La Linea Verde*<sup>2</sup> is a project of speculative character that investigates the implications that the hypothetical boundary of *La Linea Verde* has for the natural and built environment in its closest proximity. The route of the line takes one along a heterogeneous landscape, where the boundary between the built-up areas and the natural territory is not always immediately recognized. Therefore, despite its continuity, *La Linea Verde* presents complex characteristics that can be ascribed to different types of environmental situations. With Genoa's shrinking demographics, the radius of the needed urban footprint will gradually distance itself from *La Linea Verde*, at times, establishing a "zone" from the withdrawing city boundary, at others, contracting into the narrow dimension of a line. Moreover, as the city retreats, gaps and holes of legally and socially abandoned sites within the urban fabric will likely emerge.

Following the evolution of the city frontier, both as a physical entity, social construct and perhaps from

a more philosophical point of view, my research has largely revolved around exploring situations that fall in between the two categories of nature and culture. As this matter easily qualifies within the daunting category 'existential questions' I have eliminated some pitfalls by restricting my research to depicting and problematizing the conventional western concept of this relationship. Since this famed couple has generated many offsprings, shifting in shape and name depending on context and discipline, the essay will mainly address the binary concepts of landscape/architecture and city/countryside, to help situate it within an architectural discourse. The purpose is thus, not to establish a clear separation, but to promote a differentiated understanding of the age-old dialectical opposition and provide a variety of design schemes adopting the boundary as its testing ground.

#### **The Great Divide / Drawing Lines in Nature**

In his accounts of the origins of Rome and Roman settlements, architectural historian Joseph Rykwert describes the setting of its boundaries and gates as a fundamental part of the foundation rites. For the ploughing of the ground, cattle labour was employed — an ox would move along the area outside the settlement and a cow adjacent to the area set inside. Their inscription defined the city protected *within* its boundary, in contradistinction to the world *without*. The city was therefore founded as both an actual and emblematic territorial claim from the world.<sup>3</sup>

Bearing these roman rites in mind, the ontology of architecture bequeathed to us — its essence — could thus be summarized as the act of colonizing space for human appropriation. Architect and theorist Raimund Abraham taps into this line of thought, in his 1982 essay *Negation and Reconciliation*, where he defines architecture's relationship with nature as "It is the conquest of the site, the transformation of its topographical nature that manifests the ontological roots of architecture"<sup>4</sup>. Abraham's view clearly resonates with that of the western anthropocentric tradition, one which does not question the human species' ownership of and control over the environment. By setting a clear



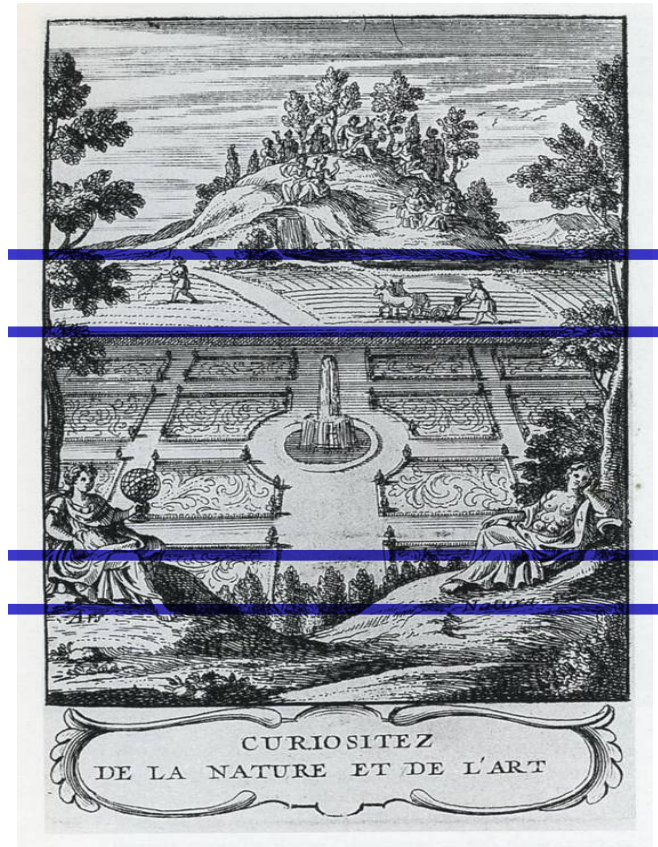
boundary of domination, the civilized man created, in this manner, the classical city. Nature, *physis*, thus becomes comprehensible to us through *nomos*<sup>5</sup>, the city wall that draws the limit between the two worlds: the ruthless justice of wilderness versus our own legal system; external nature's seemingly chaotic, autonomous effects versus our own internal political and social condition.

With the advent of the industrial city the once stable opposition, of civilized inner public spaces segregated from the outer countryside, was blurred, leaving the inert fixation to a place of the humanist city behind. The order of *place*, characterized by a stability of form was giving way to the order of *speed*, indicating a form set in motion, with blurred outlines. If I allow myself to, quite bluntly, summarize thousands of years; the classical notion of nature, that prevailed through medieval times and well into the Renaissance, placed man within a given cosmic order instituted by God, the gods or himself. Man's task was to conform to and understand his predetermined position in this hierarchy. The scientific revolution of the Enlightenment, however, brought about a shift in perception towards nature: suddenly subject and object, internal (*psyche*) and external (*materia*), as well as nature and technology, were distinguished from one another.<sup>6</sup> Science's chief task became, from this day on, to master nature. The city wall's role as a separating apparatus was, on that account, made redundant. Nature was henceforth seen as a commodity, a view that eventually paved the way for the Anthropocene hegemony.

#### Along the Frontier /

##### Acumulative Tendencies and Vectorial Regulation

According to theorist and historian Wim Nijenhuis, early signs of the city wall dissolution were already detectable in pre-industrial times, following the increased mobility of the early capitalist trading states.<sup>7</sup> Genoa undoubtedly qualifies in this category — an



Frontispiece to l'Abbé de Vallemont's  
*Curiositez de la nature et de l'art* (1705)

economy largely built upon passage and delay — yet, its mobility was largely confined towards the sea. Its land-bound geographical constraints sent it on foreign maritime ventures. Despite its northern natural fortifications, Genoa was constantly surrendering to other powers. As Fernand Braudel observed in his accounts of early European capitalist states, “like an espalier against an old wall, Genoa the modern city, had its back against the ‘feudal’ mountains - one of many paradoxes surrounding it”<sup>8</sup>. Although the mountains might appear to be a protection, the city was in fact in danger from them. An enemy approaching from the north could easily arrive at a point overlooking the town and subsequently, overthrow it. It wasn't until the 17th-century that an effective fortified wall was built along the ridges of the mountain range that stretches between the Bisagno and Val Polcevera rivers. As Nijenhuis observes, it was the authority of the traffic, that yielded true power over the city. The city wall was used as an obstruction of passage, punctuated at strategic points by regulating gates. A certain unpredictability reigned in the closest proximity of

the gate, a fuzziness in regard to the type of activities, people and signs that all swarmed around the boundary but respectively were classified into categories of belonging *within* or *without*. Nijenhuis uses the term machinic arrangement for this system of relation:

This arrangement crisscrosses different strata and assemblages, dividing and qualifying people, goods, animals, plants, words, money and images in more or less functional circuits that connect man with nature, the mechanical with the non-mechanical, the organic and the inorganic, within a single sphere of interaction.<sup>9</sup>

To belong *within* came with the privileges of securely dwelling behind the fortified city walls as opposed to an existence *without* in the disquiet presence of wanderers, enemy troops, and outcasts. In general negative connotations are paired with the extra-mural condition, and this is also how it's commonly depicted in literature. Yet, one must not discard the advantages and liberties a marginal geopolitical domain allows for. The equivocal nature of these territories gave them the status of at once being internal and external to the city. *Within*, rituals and traditions revolved around central and culturally coherent emblems of authority. The fringe, by contrast, formed a noticeably heterogenous zone. Whatever could not be accommodated *within* the strict limits of the inner-city community, or that could be considered offensive in a moral or symbolic sense, resided and flourished here. The boundary, edge, margin or fringe are all terms that, well beyond their depiction of a physical structure, hold a strong semantic potency in common. By definition, the view from the edge is almost always a critical one. For instance, the embodiment of critical reading in marginal notes, innovational and radical thinking as the cutting edge, or the alternate forms of community cultivated in fringe groups. These are all fruits of the rich critical

potential inherent to an existence by the boundary. The boundary provides the vantage point of both looking outward and inward and to more easily recognize and evaluate issues at the center.

### Civic and Geological Agency

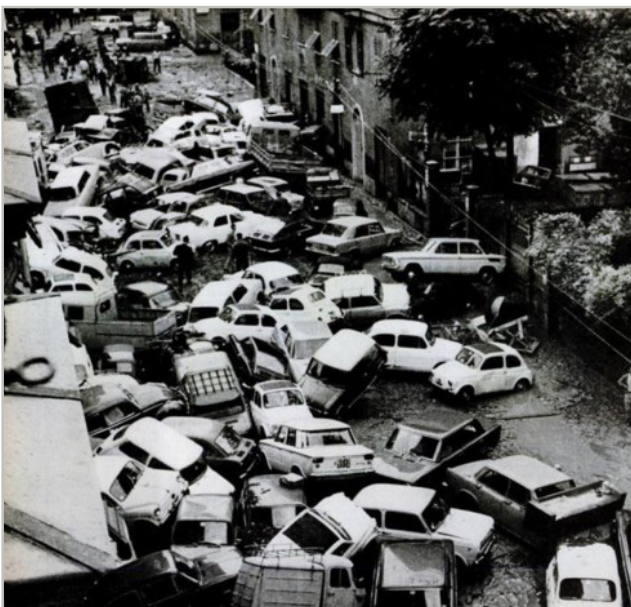
Industrialism brought about a new ambiguous, hybrid condition which emerged exponentially, lying outside of the analogous figure/ground city-as-object format. Citta diffusá, generic city, the field, "organs without bodies" and junkspace<sup>10</sup> are, although representing different standpoints, all terms that attempt to pinpoint this recent urban phenomenon now largely covering the globe.

Once again, the geological element of the Genoese landscape enforces its agency upon its civic occupants, the city has shown a certain resistance towards this sprawling development. When sprawl is addressed, it is commonly imagined as a substance evenly spreading out over a frictionless surface with no z-axis obstacle obstructing its way. The inaccessible terrain of the Genoese mountains framing the city towards the sea serves as a natural barrier against this inclining vectorial force.

Geography is part of the urban experience because geography supports urban development, giving the city a place to grow. At the same time, geography limits the reaches of the city as some land is more suitable for urban development than other land. The geographic element has emerged over deep geologic time with processes like sedimentation and orogeny, while the urban element appears overnight in civic time. Cities that adapt themselves to natural boundaries seem to feel like they belong in a place because they fit themselves to the lay of the land.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, the territory's natural resilience isn't entirely immune. Urban expansion in the city has occurred during important eras marked by phenomena of rather compulsive growth: the first industrialization around the mid 19th century, the annexation of the municipalities to the east of Genoa in 1876 and another 19 in 1926, topped off by the latest addition of the construction of massive peripheral housing blocks starting from the end of the 1950's. The urban fringe, characterized by a certain vagueness of form and composition settles in the valleys and grows along main transportation axes. This is especially true regarding areas of production, who depend on a high degree of mobility and easy access to resources such as water and power. Residential sprawl, on the other hand, tends to climb the hillsides, 'cementifying' the slopes as a result. The paving, terracing and stripping off of the mountains has had disastrous consequences for the city. This persistent exploitation has both sped up the erosion process and furthermore accelerated the water's descent towards the city during torrential rainfalls. Subsequently, the velocity of the downstream drags everything with it, creating unwanted situations of accumulation. The valleys literally transform into bathtubs of mud, water, and debris.

Accumulation of cars after 1970's floodings, Val Bisagno



### **The Natural Unnatural: Molecular dissolution.**

As opposed to the traditional fortified city frontier, the new city boundary of *La Linea Verde* is not meant as a protective bulwark against potential enemy forces but is rather a means of control: economically, limiting the area of which the municipality is financially accountable for; and environmentally, which involves returning environmental resources to the territory (e.g. planting, reforestation, hydraulic projects, the recovery of natural disasters, the restoration of streams to their natural condition, etc.). The idea behind the line is by no means a unique concept. Several European precedents such as the English green belts, the lieux magiques in the French periphery or the Berlin greenways were already established in the early 20th century, just to mention a few. In fact, the act of preserving nature or 'saving' it from humanity was initiated already in the early years of industrialism as a reaction to the rapidly deteriorated natural environment. The industrial revolution brought about an inversion of the city as a primary landscape. It transitioned from being in a landscape to become, progressively, a landscape in and of itself. This shift of balance consequently led to that nature henceforth found itself circumscribed, lending it a seemingly fabricated image.

Nature in the sense of something non-artificial, unaltered by human activity, hardly exists anymore. Even those places we call nature reserves (maintained in order to preserve fragile ecosystems and biodiversity) are paradoxically unnatural since the act of conservation itself can only ever result in something man-made. Preserved/protected nature is always a sanitized, tamed and overall more human-friendly version of the real thing - a domesticated, hyper-natural version that is little other than culture in disguise.<sup>12</sup>



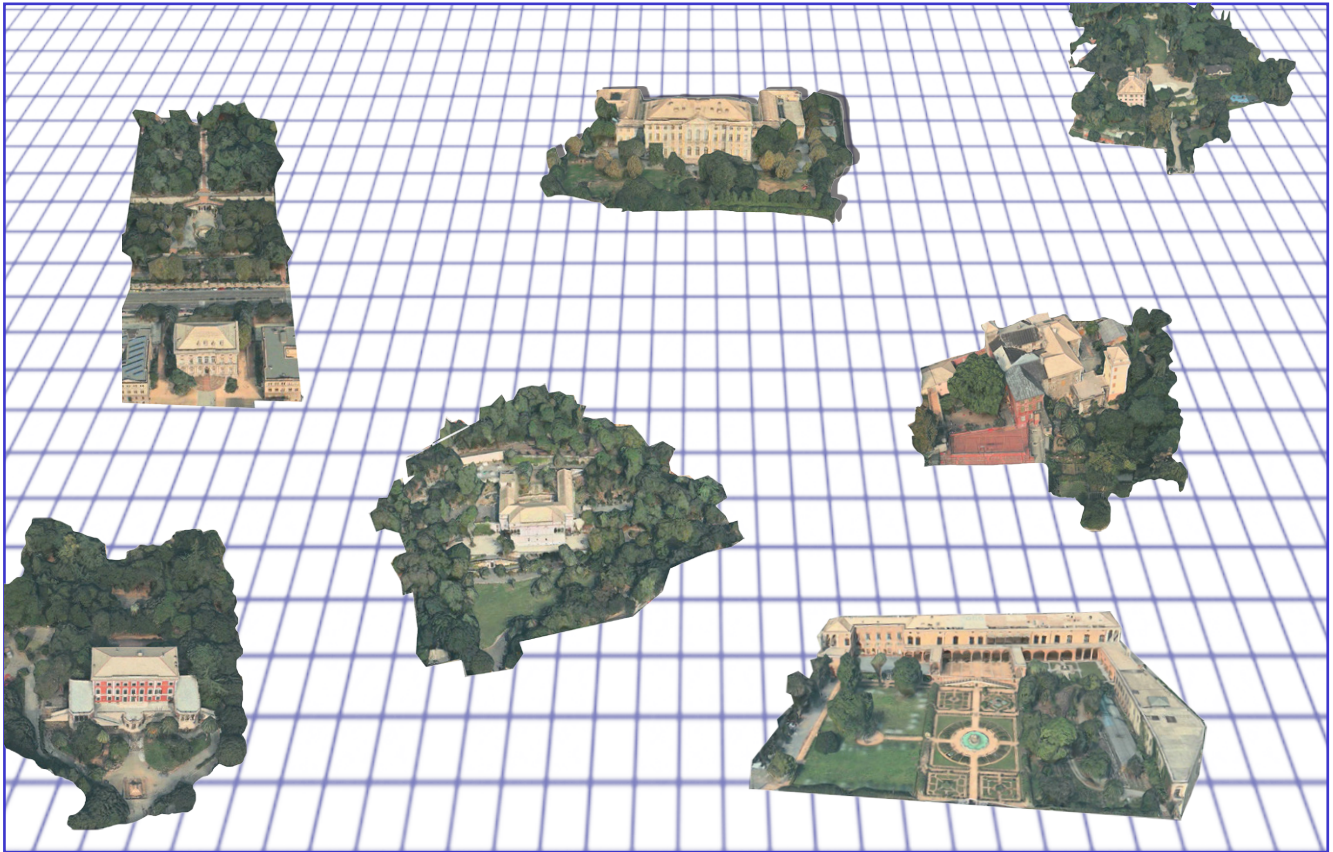


Culture in Disguise, Yosemite National Park

Today, practically every single molecule on the surface of the earth has been affected by humans<sup>13</sup>. In the words of poet and philosopher Paul Valéry “Man is a captive animal, shut up outside his cage, in all he does he is beside himself”<sup>14</sup>. Territories, as with colonies, are formed through a continuous appropriating process — a wandering midpoint — which, through constant movement simultaneously spreads and establishes centers through separation. The human is therefore continuously influencing the environment, an environment that gives her the insight of an “I”, through will, mind, drift, and sense. However, as opposed to other creations of nature, she lacks a natural habitat and position. Helmuth Plessner perceives her as “naturally artificial”, or rather, naturally unnatural, through her inherent rootlessness that forces her to create her own world in which to find her place in.<sup>15</sup> This leads us back to the origin myth of Christianity telling the story of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden, a sentence resulting in humankind’s strive, ever since, to recreate its lost ‘natural habitat’ and paradise.

#### **At home in the Threshold**

A microcosmos of this appropriating condition could be found in the Renaissance garden. Symmetrically arranged through batches of greenery in geometric patterns, the garden served as a pendant to the architectural harmony of aristocratic villas. Its primary role, however, was as a form of political theatre demonstrating the power of its owners, represented through domesticated nature<sup>16</sup>. Genoa — perhaps due to its combination of wealth and difficult terrain — had an abundance of these grand ‘Edens’ with complimentary Renaissance estates. At the time, building-space *within* the Genoese city walls was in short supply. In fact, before the Strada Nuova was built in 1550, citizens were confined to pedestrian transportation. When in need of respite the *Nobili Vecchi* would, therefore, retreat to their country palaces. Over 260 of them have survived to this day. However, they now exist in the reversed order: if they originally were surrounded by impenetrable wild vegetation, they now live on as scattered green islands circum



Scattered Genoese villas circumscribed by urban fabric

scribed by the dense city fabric *without*. Today they ironically stand for a substantial part of the city's green areal.

In addition to expressing the patron's control over nature, the Renaissance gardens served as a laboratory for semanticization of the territory. Following the period's fascination for semantics, they were perceived as in situ representations or mnemonic images of the elements of wild or cultivated nature as they were found in the territory surrounding the site<sup>17</sup>: a natural stream was translated into a fountain; a forest would reorder itself into straight lines of evenly arranged trees etc. This landscape metamorphosis had three distinct stages or rather, three 'natures': the 'first nature' was perceived as the pure wilderness handed down by the gods and which served as raw material for the 'second nature', the cultural landscape. Finally, the formal garden constituted the third nature, *la Terza Natura*.<sup>18</sup> Nature in its third condition, essentially, gained the status of landscape organized into spaces, a sort of nature in the hands of an architect.

A contemporary parallel could be found in the in-between condition(s) defined and illustrated in Rosalind Krauss' Klein Diagram. In her seminal essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", she attempts to map out sculptural practices whose work cross outside of the limits of traditional sculpture and enter into the realms of architecture and landscape.<sup>19</sup> With Hegelian reasoning, she identifies new conditions existing between architecture, not-architecture, landscape, and not-landscape. These new types are classified as site constructions, marked sites, earthworks and axiomatic structures. Although the text at the time of its publication was largely received as an attempt to theorize postmodernism it also serves as an affluent model or method for how to expand upon the notions of architecture and landscape.

Within contemporary architectural practice, the attempts to overbridge this gap have been plentiful, but not always fruitful. One could, in general, delineate two routes that are sustained by this disposition. On one hand, the practice of letting landscape



components conform to externally imposed orders by, for example, organizing them in the manner one would expect architectural elements to be manipulated. On the other, the tendency of covering buildings in greenery indicate a reverse phenomenon where buildings are often reduced to frameworks for plants.<sup>20</sup> Architect and theorist Mark Lee addresses these two impulses as ‘architecturalization’ or ‘horticulturalization’ and concludes that both streams, when translated into architecture usually fail to challenge conventional architectural practice. Lee goes on to propose a third golden middle way, introducing the concept of ‘Topological Landscapes’. Topology is an abstract term “designating a continuity of surface usually employed in the field of mathematics”<sup>21</sup>. However, in architecture, it translates, not merely into descriptive geometry but also as an allusion to the deeper poetic and philosophical meaning of a landscape<sup>22</sup>. Unfortunately, despite its promising positioning, the case studies showcased in Lee’s article never go beyond the purely formal aspects, which is further enhanced by the dominance of digital renderings as images, the haptic experiences embedded in a natural landscape are lost. Intended to be used as a merging concept between the natural and the constructed it here loses its strength when abstraction deprives it of content rather than to charge it with meaning.

Tham and Videgård’s *Garden House*, an example of horticulturalization?



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Furthermore, the ground conditions present in Lees landscape are always virgin, vacant and untouched by civic time. The fictional ‘zone’, defined by a shrinking Genoa distancing itself from its outer perimeter — *La Linea Verde* — will, on the other hand, never have a *tabula rasa* point of departure.

### Conclusion

The discipline of urban planning was founded and legitimized through the disappearance of the city frontier, as Nijenhuis points out to us, and *La Linea Verde*, a child of urbanism, undoubtedly serves as a promising answer to this search. But what is this incessant desire for a fixed contour actually worth and where does it lead us?

Seeing the bigger picture, the complete dissolution of the nature/culture dichotomy is already at our doorstep, or rather, hastily removing its cloak in the hallway. We have already established that the traditional notion of nature alongside with our anthropocentric worldview, where the earth is an artifact, has come to an end. Civic time has collided with geological time, with for us, uncontrollable consequences. As there is no ctrl-z in real life, it is tempting to make the conclusion that we are henceforth sentenced to damage control. In light of this verdict, the offset demarcation of *La Linea Verde* could serve as softer and lush defense, an attempt at reconciling and minimizing the future environmental suffering of the city *within*, lending the already authoritative territory a helping hand at pushing the city limits down the hills. This scenario implies responsibility and coexistence. Following the five stages of grief, we should now have processed our way to the final phase, that of acceptance. When this step is reached, we could leave this apocalyptic apathy behind us, and start a fresh, albeit under altered preconditions. In the meanwhile, there is architecture, guarding the world *within* (controlled environment) from the world *without* (framed spectacle).



The innate oxymoron of the fringe, as both a separative, regulative and accumulative device, gives it a physical and intellectual thickening. In nature, this is matched by the ecotone, the boundary in which two ecosystems meet and integrate, combining qualities from each system. These edges are seldom thin and unambiguous, but instead broad, blending gradually over a larger area. This tension of ecologies accounts for one of the richest locations in terms of biodiversity. In architecture this thick, yet porous edge — essentially a zone — bring together like the ecotones, the different systems of human artifice and natural process to produce a third ecology: a transitional microclimatic place adept at mediating the *within* with the *without*, free from the negative connotations of the ‘field’.

Perhaps this third ecology finally calls for an update, or at least a contemporary iteration, of the Humanist concept of *la Terza Natura*. The clear separations once portrayed in l’Abbé de Vallemont’s *Curiositez de la nature et de l’art* here take on a more deceiving and ambiguous character. In the background, a ‘nature’ containing societies of industrial forests, nature reserves, clear cuts and farmed land provide a frame for the fringe: a site in constant process, prone to open-endedness, organized to support an indeterminate and unknowable range of future uses over time and suggesting a sense of humility towards its found ground condition. This fringe zone, a post-Anthropocene version of the Renaissance garden, makes no distinguishments between the ‘natural’ and the ‘constructed’. In this fiction, the ‘raw’ materials of the first and second nature are replaced by those found in an anthropogenic landscape, revealing unacknowledged resources and latent qualities intrinsic to a fringe landscape. Lastly, in the foreground, the ossified image of the city. ♦

1 Plan developed between 2008 and 2012 through Renzo Pianos Urban Lab center and later implemented in the new PUC (Piano Urbanistico Comunale) in 2011.

2 In urbanist terminology the fringe would commonly refer to the outer edge, margin or periphery of a city. However, in a mountainous city as Genoa, the urban fringe doesn't necessarily correspond to the urban edge. As opposed to the ordinary development in a horizontal scenario, the equivalent phenomenon in a hilly territory will most likely leak out into the valleys and along transportation axis.

3 Mark Pimlott *Without and Within: Essays on Territory and their Interior* (Rotterdam: Episode Publishers, 2007) p. 60

4 Raimund Abraham, 'Negation and Reconciliation', *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal* no 19. 5-6 (1982) He goes on to say "the process of design is only a secondary and subsequent act, whose purpose is to reconcile and harmonize the consequences of the initial intervention, collision, and negation."

5 Nomos from the Greek term for "law".

6 Johan Redin, "Det Naturligt Onaturliga" *OEI Naturbegreppet [EKOEI]* #75-76 (2017) p.15

7 Wim Nijenhuis "City Frontiers and Their Disappearance" *Assemblage 19* (1991) p. 43

8 Fernand Braudel *The Wheels of Commerce: Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Centuries*, translated by Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) p.158

9 Wim Nijenhuis "City Frontiers and Their Disappearance" p. 47

10 These concepts were coined, respectively, by Bernardo Secchi, Rem Koolhaas, K.A.C. Creswell, Angélie and Siress, and finally Koolhaas again.

11 Ryan Dewey, "Agency & the Multifaceted Stories of Hybrid Places" *MONU Geographical Urbanism* #20 (2014) p.80

12 Gugger, Harry, Mações Costa, Barbara "Urban-Nature: The Ecology of Planetary Artifice" *San Rocco: Ecologies* (2014) p.33

13 Reference to title of interview with The Center for Land Use Interpretations founder Matthew Coolidge in *Sonic Acts: The Ecological Imagination* event catalogue.

14 Paul Valéry, *Aforismer* translated by Pierre Volboudt (Stockholm: Gebers, 1954) Translated from French: "L'homme est animal enfermé - à l'extérieur de sa cage. Il s'agite hors de soi."

15 Redin "Det Naturligt Onaturliga" p.19

16 'Renaissance Gardens' *Medieval Histories* 16th June 2013 (online) 2nd January 2018

17 Sebastian Marot, *Suburbanism and the Art of Memory* (London: AA Publication, 2003) p.20

18 John Dixon Hunt, *Garden Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p.85

19 Rosalind Krauss "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" *October*, Vol. 8. (MIT Press 1979) p.41-42

20 Mark Lee "The Dutch Savannah - Approaches to Topological Landscape". *Daidalos* 73 (1999), p. 9-10

21 Christophe Girot, *Topology - A new measure of quality in landscape architecture* (online) 14th December 2017

22 Ibid.

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- Paul Valéry, *Aforismer* translated by Pierre Volboudt (Stockholm: Gebers, 1954)
- A Illustration of La Linea Verde, 2017. Bianca Eriksson
- B Frontispiece to l'Abbé de Vallemont's *Curiositez de la nature et de l'art* (1705) Pierre Le Lorrain.
- C Accumulation of cars after 1970s floodings. Author unknown.
- D Culture in disguise. Yosemite National Park, 2016. Bianca Eriksson
- E Illustration of Scattered Genoese Villas, 2017 Bianca Eriksson.
- F Horticulturalization of Architecture in 'Garden House' by Tham & Videgård Architects. 2009 Åke E:son Lindman
- G Map I of Genoa from *Regulation, Vectors, Accumulation*. 2018, Bianca Eriksson
- H Map II of Genoa from *Regulation, Vectors, Accumulation*. 2018, Bianca Eriksson
- I-M Extracts from *La Linea Verde: A Field Guide* 2017, Bianca Eriksson