



Günther Vogt
landscape designer

The collective space

An interview
by Laura Hilti

Kunstverein Schichtwechsel
POSITIONEN & DISKURSE



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Office Life in Zurich
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In October 2011 the Kunstverein Schichtwechsel opened the exhibition “Dreck haelt warm – Grösse aus dem Unterholz” (“Mud keeps warm – Greetings from the undergrowth”). In order to learn more about the “undergrowth”, curator and art educator Laura Hilti interviewed landscape architect Günther Vogt. After starting out by discussing the function of the “undergrowth” in the forest, a conversation developed around the advantages and disadvantages of operating in the shadows, the necessity for experimentation and the question of how collective space can be created in the sphere of art.



“Constructed Nature”
Masoala Regenwaldhalle,
Zoo Zürich

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Micciché

Günther Vogt, born in Liechtenstein in 1957, is a landscape designer, a knowledgeable botanist and a lover of literature. In the year 2000 he founded Vogt Landscape Designers in Zurich, then opened an office in Munich in 2002, another in London in 2008, and most recently launched Vogt Berlin in 2010. In team with his 40 colleagues Vogt undertakes both national and international projects of varying types and sizes. Since 2005 he has been the professor for landscape design in the architecture department at the Eidgenössischen Technischen Hochschule (ETH) in Zurich. In the autumn of 2012 he was the acting guest professor in the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, and from 2007 until 2011 he was chairman of the Netzwerk Stadt und Landschaft (NSL) of the ETH in Zurich. In 2012 he was awarded the Prix Meret Oppenheim.

What do you associate with
the term „undergrowth“?

I think of forests. There are very beautiful forests. Some are populated by fully-grown beech trees, beneath which absolutely nothing grows. In others, a kind of second forest sprouts up in the shadow of the tall trees. The small trees wait for the moment when a taller tree falls over, allowing the light to shine through and enabling them to grow further. This is the undergrowth. It can be compared to an urban suburb, with its own horizon and its own benchmark.

Where did you detect the potential
of undergrowth?

Undergrowth has an incredible potential, but a different one to the forest above it. Undergrowth is much more dynamic and can change more rapidly. A beech grove without it will inevitably decay and collapse. Undergrowth is more alive, more adaptable and therefore also more resistant.

I was in Graubünden yesterday and discovered many wild vines which are not indigenous to the area. Such invasive species are able to nest due the impact of climate change. Many people forget that after the Ice Age, a few thousand years ago, all we had here were pastures, birch trees and hazelnut trees. Linden and beech trees have migrated from zones neighboring glaciers. They have literally crept through the undergrowth. Such changes to the vegetation are the repercussions we have brought into being through our influence on the climate. As far as I can see though this is not a negative thing, rather it represents potential and a reservoir for change.

With many things, such as immigration for example, we see the positive effects only with the benefit of hindsight. In Zurich there was already massive immigration from Germany by the end of the 19th century, which of course did not take place without some conflict. Looking back now we have to recognise that it was good for the city. There are no criminals, bad guys or bandits lurking in the undergrowth, rather something that's different, and which may ultimately prove to be useful. If the climate keeps getting warmer and certain forest species are no longer able to grow here, I will be absolutely delighted if others come along to take their place.

How do you maintain the same level of energy when you have achieved a certain level of recognition in your profession and you have become, in a manner of speaking, one of the tall trees?

You have to fight to maintain it. Fame is always relative though. I don't necessarily become famous through my work, but rather through my connections. I work together with many friends in the fields of urban development and art, as well as in architecture, and it's through these connections that I eventually become well-known. I become an item in their luggage as they move along on their journey.

My background has definitely helped me strongly to keep my feet on the ground. Students have told me that what they appreciate about me the most is that I never become hectic or nervous.

If you want to ask the right questions, you cannot engage in dialogue from an ivory tower. It must take place at eye level.



„Mapping everything“
Summer school Berlin/
Zurich

Students explore the open/collective space with Günther Vogt and Olafur Eliasson in Zurich and in Berlin. Through actions (having barbecues, camping, moving around while lying down or only being at right angles) they attempt to obtain a different perspective of space.

© Case Studio Vogt



Working with students and artists keeps me alert and fresh. Another important aspect, however, is maintaining the spirit of exploration and the mindset always to keep going and to stick at the task in hand. The danger of resting on your laurels is always there once you have established yourself, but through being engaged in the work itself, debating with others and the arrival of new discoveries, life remains exciting. I realise that my perspective has remained fresh when I am emotionally affected by a work of art, if it annoys or confuses me. Besides, to network with the „undergrowth“, by interacting with young artists for instance, is absolutely fascinating for me.

I would be giving up a great deal if I could no longer talk with them because they were afraid of my celebrity, or if I would only talk to them if I thought that one day they would become famous. Apart from that it would be very dangerous to think of yourself as a star that is beyond the possibility of failing. To think in this way suggests that you have already failed.

What does it mean to fail?

Not all projects are of the same quality. Whenever you take a risk a project can go wrong at any moment, however you choose to define this. I've learned much more from experiences which have not gone as well as I would have liked, than I have from other, more successful ones. A readiness to assume risk is essential, not in the pursuit of glory, but rather in order to gain experience. I know quite clearly how to do something that will work. But, regardless of economic viability and the quality of the work, it's less engaging to reproduce familiar work at the cost of foregoing open-ended research and dialogue.

Let me give you an example. As a student I studied sociology. Nowadays I assimilate what I learned in this field into my work, despite the fact that I have no longer been engaged in it for many years. Of course I do this in another, much more serious way than I did in the past. I recognise now that arranging a painting competition would not help me to design a park. That would be like asking a child, who for many years has only played on the swings, which toy of all of the toys in all of the world, he or she would choose to have. Of course the child would

choose the swings because he or she does not know anything else.

When you are interested in a fair and honest exchange of ideas, you have to find new methods of achieving this end. I've learned a great deal from artists in this respect. It's important not just to ask the specific questions which we want to have answered. Ultimately the respondents should neither design a park nor do we want to expose them as non-specialists. Our interest lies in discovering their expectations. I fear that in landscape design the general public are often not consulted in the planning process, and that the social process is not taken on board as constituting a part of the work.

In the 80's I took a course at the ETH, taught by Lucius Burckhardt. He saw to it that we no longer drew buildings, but rather that we only wrote about them. He instilled in us that, although it's surely important to design an attractive bus stop with trees around it, it is still much more important to people that the bus comes by frequently. The point is always to keep in mind how things look from the other side and to develop corresponding strategies. If you want to ask the right questions, you cannot engage in dialogue from an ivory tower. It must take place at eye level.

Does this dialogue at eye level take place within the artistic context? Are the knowledge and experience of visitors taken seriously?

I have experienced it as disastrous to find myself, from time to time, back in the situation of being at school during a guided exhibition tour. It is the situation where you have the right to ask, but nobody actually asks anything.

When I do a guided tour myself I do not prompt the participants to ask questions. I put forward certain explanations to be considered and then leave it open for anyone to ask questions. Of course there are particular works of art for which I do not need any guidance, but, on many occasions, I am happy to have some help. What I aim to do is neither to request visitors to take part, nor to expose them and ultimately leave them with the feeling that they do not have enough knowledge.

Aperitif, at Vogt Landscape Designers
© VOGT



Even if we meet up and just drink a glass of wine, we are occupying a place for a short, collective moment in time.



← ↗ Vernissage „Non Sight Site“
© Case Studio VOGT

I believe that it is, first and foremost, a question of taking people seriously, and establishing a connection to their everyday life. In this context it is important to reflect on the nature of the space which we would like to set up. I don't consider the term „public space“ to be particularly helpful as it remains very abstract. In contrast, the term „collective space“ is much more interesting as it is a space where there's life.

An exhibition is of no use to anyone when nobody comes to see it – and that has nothing to do with economic viability. Even if we meet up and just drink a glass of wine, we are occupying a place for a short, collective moment in time. Interesting constellations between people can arise in situations such as these. The content of the exhibition is ever present, naturally, but it only plays a role much later, in the sense that it may potentially be picked up on again within the dialogue.

Another example of the difference between open and collective spaces is in the street. Streets are very ugly and only become engrossing when many people are there. When I go shopping I love to go by foot because I meet people along the way. When I go regularly to the same weekly market I see the same people time and again. We nod to each other from time to time and we are somehow bonded together, in a kind of tacit chummy way.

It's essential that we promote such collectivity, particularly seeing that significantly more than 50 percent of homes in Zurich are single-occupancy homes. This is not however some romanticised social project. We must categorically avoid allowing ourselves to be pushed into this corner.

In exhibitions curators have the opportunity to be on site and to talk with the visitors. How does a landscape designer design a space without being in contact with future users of this space?

After completing an art or architecture degree you are, to all intents and purposes, capable of acting. In my profession there are more difficulties, as expertise is required in natural science and design, as well as in social and cultural realms.

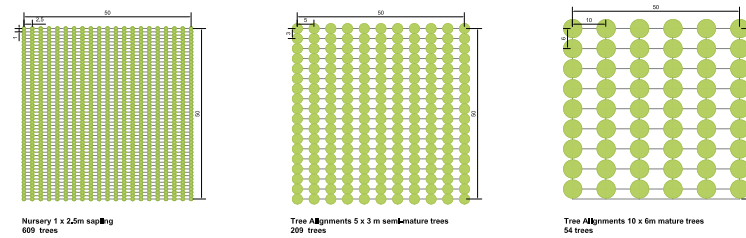
I observe many students in Zurich who travel back to their parents' place in the village every weekend. I ask myself how they ever want to design city spaces when they have never lived there, and accordingly, have no understanding for how these spaces can evolve. I live here in the city centre and I am occasionally awakened at the weekend by police sirens, when I would like to sleep. That's a part of city life. How should young architects design kitchens if they never cook? How should they understand how a four-person family in a normal apartment functions?

Projects in the field of landscape design are still somewhat more complex. For example, there are completely different people in a park on a Wednesday afternoon than there are on a Saturday morning. So how can the space best be utilised to accommodate their different needs? How can conflicts be avoided?

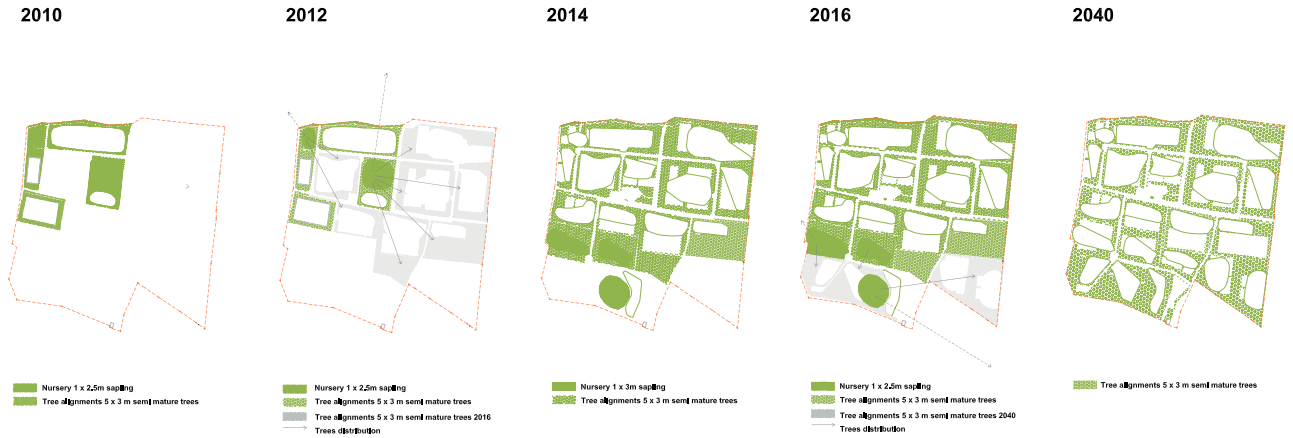
On top of this comes the fact that societies find themselves in a permanent state of flux. I experienced this in London. It's useless to have lovely open spaces when young people have no work. When young people between 20 and 25 have nothing to do and they recognise that the world did not wait for them, frustration follows close behind. This phenomenon is very strongly present in parks and in other public spaces. But there are also other changes, within youth culture for example. During the skateboarding culture of the 90's, skateboarders used shopping malls and parking lots as there were many concrete walls at hand. This has now been perverted as skateboarding sites have been built out of chrome steel and thereby the potential for youth culture to demonstrate has been taken away.

As landscape designers we are, however, also geographically limited by the nature of the materials with which we work. Designers can work all over the world, from Shanghai to Abu Dhabi, but each place is different due to the plants which grow there. Added to this is the fact that completely different social and cultural problems exist in each place.

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„Natural Planting Strategy“
Tree school as a park,
Dagenham Dock, London
© VOGT



Dagenham Dock, London
© VOGT

Social projects, like so-called Urban Farming, are very exciting. People there produce everything themselves, from honey to fish to their own crops.



"On the rooftops"

Urban Farming (Planting of various kinds of mints/honey-tasting), ETH Zürich

© Lynn Peemoeller

To what extent are the problems in London different to those in Zurich?

One example is that public city planning, which we still have in continental Europe, has ceased to exist in London. The question there is whether the projects can actually be maintained on a long-term basis, so in order to guarantee such long-term maintenance, we have increasingly started to combine building processes with social processes. One proposal we made was to establish a tree nursery in an area in central London. The idea was to plant trees on all free expanses, which would in turn be cared for and used by the inhabitants of these areas. When we put this proposition to the people living there they were thrilled. Under the scheme their children would be able to learn how to plant trees themselves and to cultivate them.

Do similar projects exist, which are organised by the inhabitants themselves?

Where our office is situated, in the area of east London where there was so much unrest a few months ago, you would imagine that there are no green areas. In actual fact there are many of them, but you just don't see them as they are to be found in semi-private or private courtyards, or on rooftops.

Social projects, like so-called Urban Farming, are very exciting. People there produce everything themselves, from honey to fish to their own crops. The quality of fruit and vegetables which we are used to here in Switzerland is also available in London, but at a price almost nobody can afford.

We are trying to pick up on phenomena such as these on an urban developmental level. At the ETH in Zurich we have just now received the approval to develop a garden project on the rooftop of a new building. The responsibility for this project lies with the students, and they will have to plan and organise the whole thing. They will have to consider how to go about dealing with all the tomatoes they will produce there, and coordinate amongst themselves how the plants will get watered at weekends. Not least, they will have to develop a strategy to enable the project to continue once they have left university.

When thirty people in Zurich are sitting together at a table it is almost already a kind of „Happening“. In situations like these you notice when someone is not doing so well and you can talk about it.

Breakfast at Vogt Landscape
Designers AG, Zürich
© VOGT



Do you also encourage social processes within your offices in Zurich, Berlin and London?

In all of our offices at half past nine or ten o'clock everybody has breakfast together. We learn to sit and eat together at the table. Many of our work colleagues live alone and many were only children. When thirty people in Zurich are sitting together at a table it is almost already a kind of „Happening“. In situations like these you notice when someone is not doing so well and you can talk about it.

It seems that you regard the establishment of such collaborative situations to be your responsibility. Do you think that the initiation of social processes in the field of art should likewise come „from above“?

I don't believe that visitors to museums would ever demand something for themselves. If at all, it's for the artists to bring about the corresponding initiatives. So I would say that such things have to come from the other side, from the institutions.

The Masoala rainforest hall in Zurich zoo, which you were commissioned to design, seems to exert a power of attraction for many different people.

What can this be attributed to?

Primary school children who come to the Masoala hall are, for the most part, absolutely fascinated. They see animals there, roaming around on the same level as them. This confuses them and what they would most like to do is leave the route and go over to be with them. Their questions come firing out as though they were being shot from a gun. The important thing here, however, is the previous information they have at their disposal. They find themselves in a simulation and they can't tell if it's a model or if it's reality. They want to know why it is the way it is. They ask exactly the right questions, even if they don't use advanced vocabulary.

In Switzerland, and also in Liechtenstein, it's very difficult to create places like this, as we can be in the Alps or at a lake in virtually no time at all. It's almost



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"Constructed Nature"
Masoala Rainforest hall,
Zurich Zoo
© Christian Vogt

impossible to compete with such beautiful natural landscapes. Things are different though in cities like London and Paris. From these cities you have to travel great distances to experience unspoiled nature, and nature within these cities is second, third, or even fourth hand.

Why is it that people feel comfortable in certain places but not in others?

I believe that people feel comfortable in those places which they can use in their own way. In many artistic spaces there still appears to be a preponderance of elite cultural sensibility, which is comparable to the image of the bourgeois, formalistic park ideal of 1900. Back then the lieutenant would conduct his constitutional walk with a stiff bearing and the grass was naturally not allowed to be walked upon. This has very little resemblance to how people move around in parks nowadays.

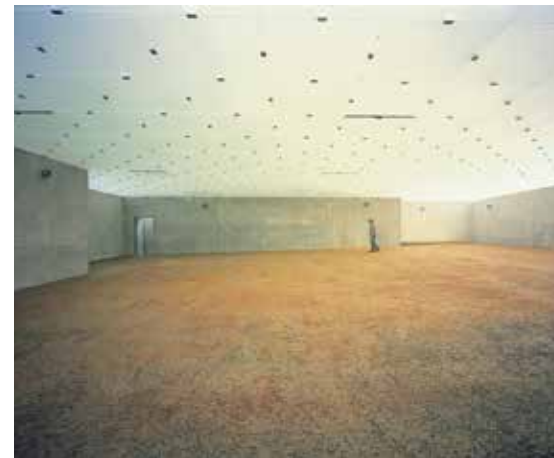
The English countryside garden is very interesting. Things are largely left open there, in contrast to the previous, predominantly geometric and ornamental type of garden. People can see in them whatever they would like to see. There is no perspective nor mode of behaviour imposed upon them. The siting of gardens like these was once a highly political topic, as they no longer functioned solely for the purposes of rich people, but also for the wider social stratum.

When I walk through Masoala hall I sometimes listen to what people say about it and which things stand out for them. The ideas they have have largely never dawned on me. When a place allows for various interpretations and approaches, it becomes interesting for people from all different walks of life.

What role can the integration of different interpretations play in bringing art across to people?

In the exhibition with Olafur Eliasson at the Kunsthhaus Bregenz I found myself for the first time in a situation of communicating art to people. My role was to be on hand to discuss the art, but I took this to mean that I should explain the art. Olafur very quickly made it clear

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"The mediated motion"
Exhibition in
Kunsthhaus Bregenz
© Kunsthhaus Bregenz,
Olafur Eliasson,
Publisher Walther König,
Markus Tretter



"The mediated motion"
Exhibition in
Kunsthau Bregenz
© Kunsthau Bregenz,
Olafur Eliasson,
Publisher Walther König,
Markus Tretter

that this was not the goal at all. He pointed out that my role was simply to be there and then people themselves would ask questions.

By chance, a very interesting discussion developed during a tour, about the invitation card and whether it depicted a natural or a man-made cultural disaster.

I believe that authenticity is important in situations like these. However, it is necessary to develop new tools for each exhibition and each piece of work. It's a bit like doing handicrafts. You always have to make use of what's available to you.

Can that be learned?

Yes, I think so. The first step is to be very well prepared, but after that it is a question of how you get on with people. Talent does not play a leading role. In teaching it's more important than anything else that you like people. Although I sometimes berate and wring my hands about the generation of my students, they know that I trust them. Humour can be helpful in this context but cynicism, on the other hand, will not get you far. You have to enjoy working with people from different backgrounds.

When we were working at the „House of Sounds“ in Toggenburg, one of the highlights for me was when Marcel Meili presented the concept for the architecture. There were all kinds of people there, from folk musicians to representatives of nature conservation organisations. Every person there understood the message Meili wanted to bring across, and his speech could just as easily have been delivered at Harvard. There is a great art in this, which requires an extensive amount of work and experience to achieve, and there is probably no recipe for it.

In exhibitions it is important to find the right language which works for different kinds of people. I see one problem as being that, although exhibitions are certainly always improving and getting more ambitious in terms of curating, they are moreover, by this nature, also assuming more knowledge of people and need more explanation. If bridging the gaps between different knowledge backgrounds and experiential horizons is unsuccessful, and people feel that exhibitions are not stimulating them any more, then at some point they will no longer bother coming to see them.

How can people who identify with different social backgrounds find their own way to benefit from an art exhibition?

Olafur Eliasson was right when he said that we have to experience social processes in order to move forward. We cannot simply dictate that social processes should take place and then just initiate them.

In the 80's, for example, we proposed to build gardens in relatively down-at-heel housing estates. Projects like this never appear in glossy magazines as they are not particularly appealing image-wise. We worked with a sociologist during this period and, all told, it took five years for the gardens to be established. We did everything ourselves, right up to the point of organising the beer and sausages. It needed a huge amount of time until the people found a form of self-organisation, as they had had absolutely no experience about these things when we started out. The project is still in operation today by the way.

Why is it, nonetheless, that processes like these seldom exist?

The huge amount of work that lies behind these processes is often underestimated, and organising beer and sausages appears to some people to be trivial. In the end it really comes down to the small details like these. If I meet visitors at the entrance to an exhibition for example, it's a physical gesture but it's also a meaningful one. This kind of act could be construed to be simply kind or cheerful, but it can also help to break down barriers.

To a certain degree processes have to be experienced, and they cannot be brought across to people by talking about or trying to explain them. This approach is very time-consuming and demands the ability to slip into different roles from the CEO to the caretaker. It is very strongly about having a physical presence and providing the opportunity for people to interact and conduct a dialogue. Maybe all of the people present have entirely different views on life, but they are capable of spending an hour or two exchanging ideas with one another in a non-confrontational way, and may even learn something from one another.

I also observe with my students that they are sometimes unable to discriminate the situations in which it's ok to send an email, and when it's important to meet in person to develop ideas. It may be that older people have gained previous experience, which has given them the feeling for the occasions when either digital or analogue should be applied. That is why it's important to entice people to come to a place. It only has to happen once. Once they have had such an experience, they will keep coming back.

Our experience with our art project has shown us that the best ideas arise when the parties involved work together on location. Interestingly, it's actually younger people who are often more difficult to convince that working together remotely does not bring about the same results.

To me it is important to connect art to normal life. For a start the historical context with older works of art should be made comprehensible. Art historians must seek help from experts in other fields if they are unable to manage this alone. Instead of creating an aura with the presumption that art works must be good because they are expensive, it would be better instead to concentrate on the everyday life of artists, their motivations and their social circumstances.

To come back to art once again: In your opinion, how should exhibitions be designed in order to be attractive for people who have no background in art history?

Many works of art, like those of Dan Graham for example, were highly political. I think it's important that an observer can follow the concerns with which the artist was engaged. It's regrettable that works of art of this nature have had their political teeth blunted within many contemporary museums.

Thank you very much for the interview.

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"Mapping everything"
Summerschool Berlin/
Zurich

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