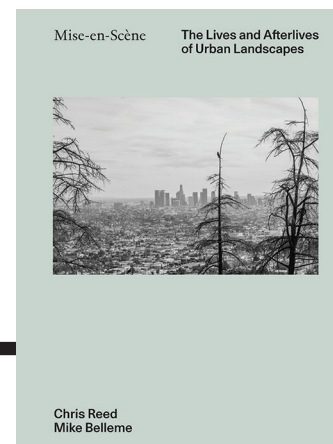


MIND THE MILIEU

MISE-EN-SCÈNE: THE LIVES AND AFTERLIVES OF URBAN LANDSCAPES

BY CHRIS REED AND MIKE BELLEME; NOVATO, CALIFORNIA:
ORO EDITIONS, 2021; 340 PAGES, \$45.

REVIEWED BY JULIAN RAXWORTHY



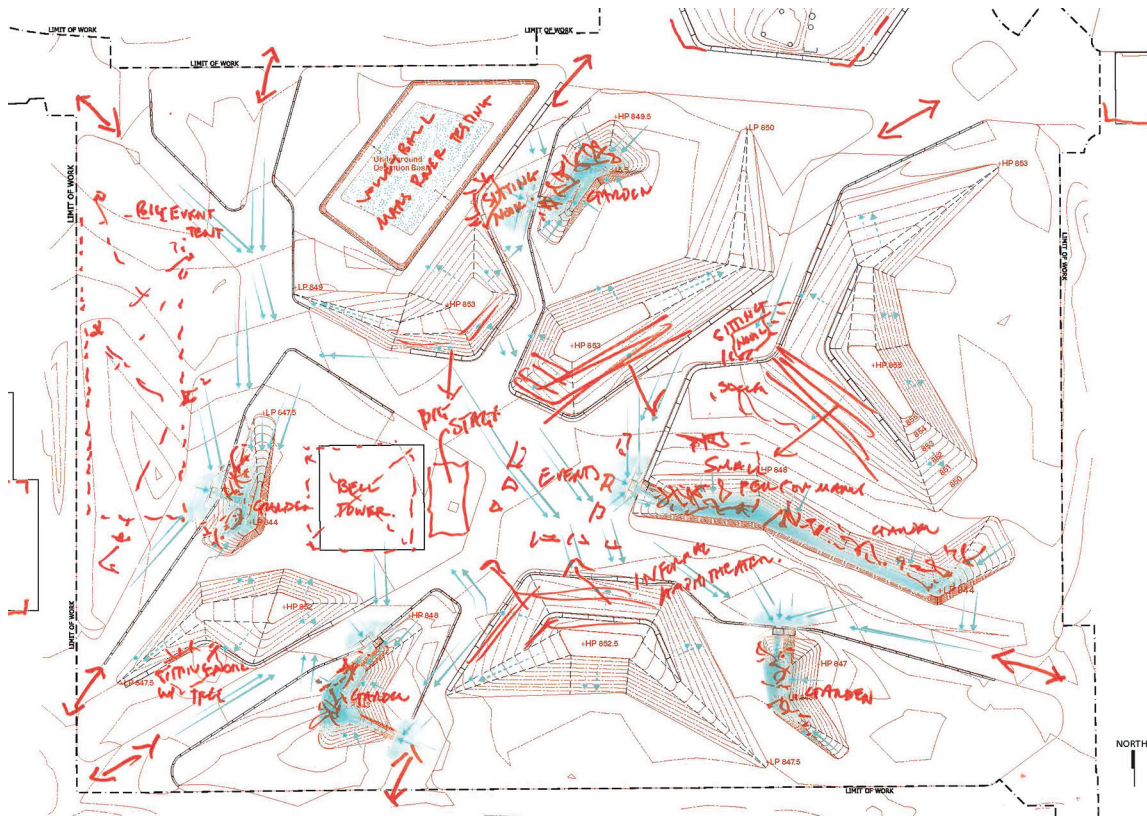
A French term used in the theater, *mise-en-scène* refers to the elements of the stage and how they are organized to give meaning to the play through a visual assemblage. *Mise-en-Scène: The Lives and Afterlives of Urban Landscapes* documents the nature and people of Stoss Landscape Urbanism projects—roughly half built and half unbuilt—and includes supporting essays by a range of writers. I found an interesting and productive paradox between the theatrical definition of *mise-en-scène* and what might be banally called “postoccupancy evaluation,” a difference characterized by control of the narrative around the project, since the volume treads a fine line between objective documentation and monograph. This begs the question: Is the purpose of the book a reflection on built work (as one might expect in a postoccupancy evaluation), or postfacto representation, since it repositions the projects?

Mise-en-Scène is a handsome hardcover, with focus on cities where Stoss has produced projects, including Los Angeles; Galveston, Texas; St. Louis; Green Bay, Wisconsin; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Detroit; and Boston, which is home base for founding director Chris Reed, FASLA. Illustrated largely with Mike Bellemé’s black-and-white photography, the structure follows a repeating format: Each city’s section starts with a brief positioning abstract discussing the city and its physical, economic,

and/or industrial changes, and some analysis of the social conditions related to an urban mapping to orient the reader. The abstracts emphasize urban infrastructure, conurbations, and links to natural systems such as topography, coastline, or rivers.

In each chapter, Stoss project images are inserted next to Bellemé’s photography. The project images are perplexing in their abstractness against Bellemé’s gratuitous and oblique realism. There’s little resonance between the two, which requires the reader to find a relationship for them (not unreasonably). Since Rem Koolhaas and OMA’s iconic *S,M,L,XL*, designed by Bruce Mau, design books now attempt to respond to aspects of their topic through the physical object, and *Mise-en-Scène*, designed by IN-FO.CO, reflects this model, with a staccato rhythm of glossy sections with essays inserted on narrow sheets of matte, pale green paper at the end of each chapter.

Reed introduces *Mise-en-Scène*, accompanied by five essays by Mimi Zeiger (LAM’s Books editor); De Nichols; Julia Czerniak, ASLA; Nina-Marie Lister, Honorary ASLA; and Sara Zewde, ASLA. Reed’s essay is personal in nature and begins with the social, and a confession—prompted by his children’s play—that the “unselfconscious appropriation of things has always fascinated me.” This leads to a description of Stoss’s method



LEFT
A marked plan of the Eda U. Gerstacker Grove at the University of Michigan serves as a pronounced disjunction with Mike Belleme's photographs.

coexistence across elusive divides,” which uses her daily walk in Pasadena to narrate a series of planning, racial, and ecological perspectives on the spaces she passes through, crossing edges. Among them are observations of where Black and Brown people maintain white suburban landscapes; the monitoring of the nonhuman on the edge between suburbia and “wilderness”; and invocations of Reyner Banham’s “glib” analysis of Los Angeles topography and economic stratification by elevation in the city’s foothills and their intersection with wildfire.

Perhaps there is a clue in the ambiguous, or deliberately enigmatic;

of using observation of people to inform design, an approach influenced by William Whyte's *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, which Reed cites. Reed tells stories from his life that articulate his personal relationship to these urban issues and other infrastructural concerns that are reflected in Stoss's work and the book in general. He notes his own relationship with racial prejudice and police violence—his wife and business partner is Black, as are his children, he tells us—and it's clear that *Mise-en-Scène* is a political statement, an account that I welcome, since a reoccurring criticism I have of landscape urbanism is its avoidance of the political and the economic. *Mise-en-Scène* is representative of the disciplinary adjustment happening in landscape architecture and its academic programs since the broad cultural shift following the murder of George Floyd and the rise of Black Lives Matter.

This context is pertinent to the two essays that focus on the way that spaces and discourses have boundaries that organize and exclude. Discussing Los Angeles, Zeiger tells “a story of uneasy

Zeiger observes that “science fiction precepts tell us that the most critical speculations are grounded in the present.” Looking at Stoss’s images of high-tech infrastructure schemes for California State Route 2 and park topographies for Venice High School as “critical speculations,” I note the stark difference between Stoss’s work and the familiar representation of Los Angeles and its topography, its vegetation, and its people that Belleme shows, which again presents readers with some cognitive dissonance.

Immediately following the section on St. Louis, designer-activist De Nichols reflects on the spatial racial division in the city, based on her experience of living there and working in community engagement, and comparing it to her hometown of Cleveland, Mississippi. The term “spatial justice” is potent, yet often ambiguous, but in her chapter, Nichols gives space form, comparing the effects of the clear boundaries of Cleveland’s racial division with “block-by-block hypersegregation” in St. Louis. In remembering the uprising in Ferguson in 2014 after the murder of



THE BLACK-AND-WHITE IMAGE IS A SIGNIFIER OF THE ARTFUL DOMAIN OF PHOTOGRAPHY WITH ITS EXPECTED FOCUS ON "THE REAL."

ABOVE

The assemblage of nature and technology in infrastructure was a powerful impetus for the propositions of landscape urbanism, shown more prosaically by Belleme.

RIGHT

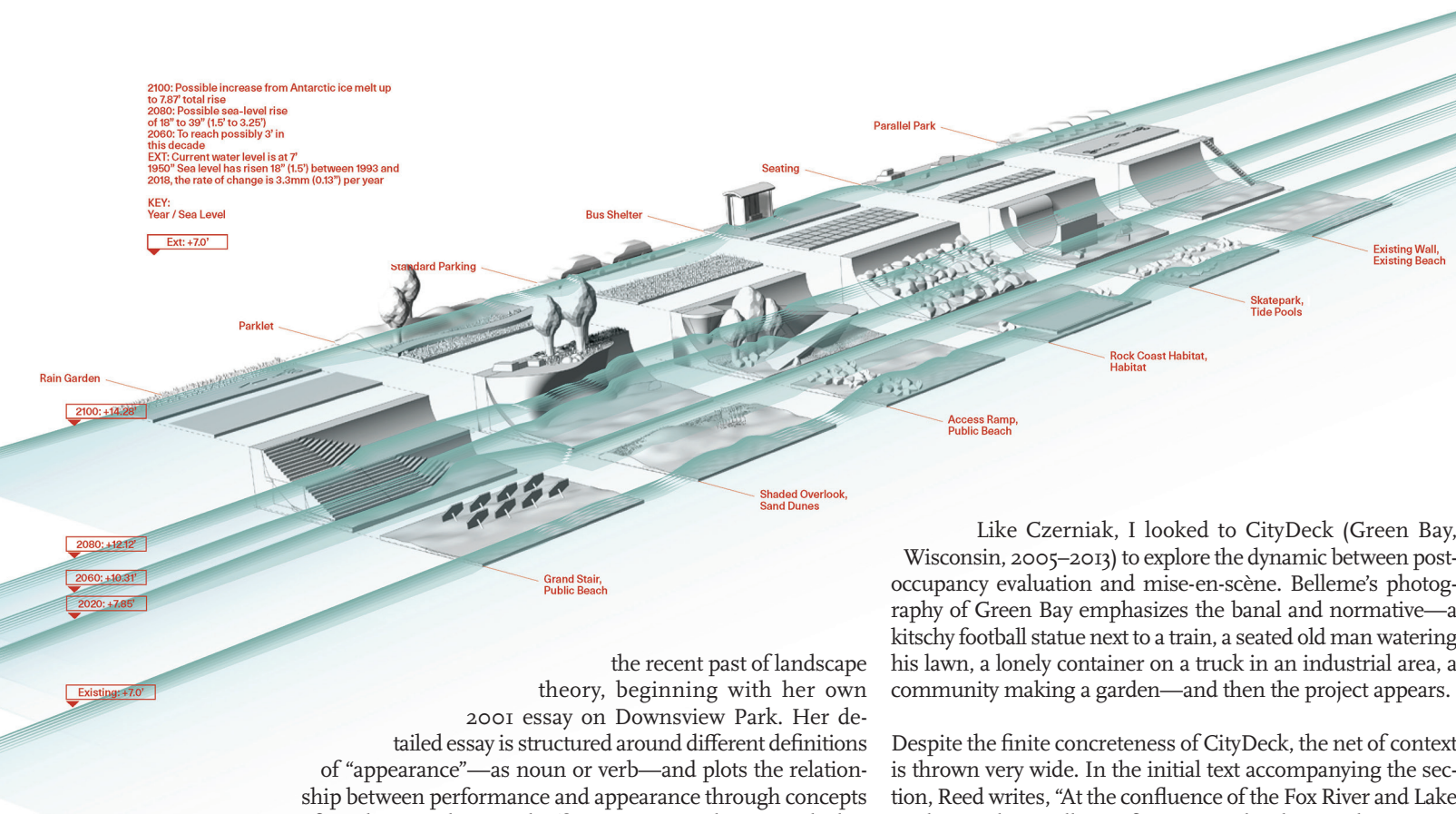
It can be difficult in Belleme's photographs to see an image outside familiar photographic typologies.

Michael Brown Jr., Nichols writes that she "walked the streets in protest more than I walked my own neighborhood or our local trails and parks."

Reading about the actions and reactions set amid the city fabric, I realize that activism might also be thought of as an activation of urban forms that resist the implicit organization of society. As such, Nichols's activism seems at odds with the conventional approach of Stoss's Chouteau Greenway Framework Plan in the St. Louis section, with its "city of islands" that seeks to use greenways to "reconnect people and communities, orient new approaches to social and racial equity, and forge new multiracial futures." The chapter also features a "toolkit" that Stoss used as part of the "open-ended discussions among community members" to create "consistent identity and legibility." This contrast between activism and convention demonstrates a key issue facing landscape architecture: Can existing methods of practice be modified to address issues like race, or must entirely different practices be developed by Black practitioners? Reading Nichols, I would err on the side of the latter proposition.



Julia Czerniak's essay is the most direct discussion of Stoss projects in the book, reviewing two projects in Wisconsin: the Erie Street Plaza in Milwaukee and Stoss's most famous work, the CityDeck in Green Bay. Her contribution, titled "Appearance and (Aesthetic) Experience: The Ongoing Project of Stoss," begins with a timeline that tracks a history of appearance in



ABOVE
The Galveston Seawall will “inject new social activity, new adapted ecosystems,” but what is the social, and will the people in Belleme’s pictures be those agents?

the recent past of landscape theory, beginning with her own 2001 essay on Downsview Park. Her detailed essay is structured around different definitions of “appearance”—as noun or verb—and plots the relationship between performance and appearance through concepts of aesthetics, place, and affect. I agree with Czerniak that performance is a core aspect of landscape urbanism rhetoric, while appearance has been, as she acknowledges, almost a dirty word during the period of landscape urbanism. Yet, after her site visits to these two Wisconsin projects, it’s surprising that Czerniak describes their appearance in a very literal way. I found myself wanting to know what the design does to her as a visitor.

The essay culminates by arguing for a rapprochement: “Stoss has developed a provocative both/and design sensibility: They *both* respond to the field’s highest ethical responsibilities and external concerns *and* engage in their own internal preoccupation with the look of things.” To some degree I agree with Marc Treib, Honorary ASLA—whom Czerniak also discusses—who argues for the importance of design. That such a valuation seems romantic tells you how far the discipline has traveled in the past 20 years *from* design.

Like Czerniak, I looked to CityDeck (Green Bay, Wisconsin, 2005–2013) to explore the dynamic between post-occupancy evaluation and *mise-en-scène*. Belleme’s photography of Green Bay emphasizes the banal and normative—a kitschy football statue next to a train, a seated old man watering his lawn, a lonely container on a truck in an industrial area, a community making a garden—and then the project appears.

Despite the finite concreteness of CityDeck, the net of context is thrown very wide. In the initial text accompanying the section, Reed writes, “At the confluence of the Fox River and Lake Michigan, the small city of Green Bay has been rediscovering its sense of community in part through new urban and river-front development.” Designers (and clients, to be fair) tend to use urban analysis as a rhetorical tool that suggests a project’s critical location and social agency, which may not always be reflected in the project itself.

CityDeck is best known for the angled deck after which it is named, a timber surface that folds from something to walk *on* to something to sit *in*, a familiar approach that leaves open its potential function to be determined by users in an “appropriation” of a kind mentioned by Reed in his introduction. Like an icon for the project’s ambiguous synthesis of form and function, a key photograph that appeared on completion of the CityDeck, and which is included on Stoss’s web page for the project, features a large group of people on yoga mats in Warrior (Virabhadrasana) pose on the deck (presumably at dawn!), the angle of their pose mirroring the nearby angle of the deck.

RIGHT

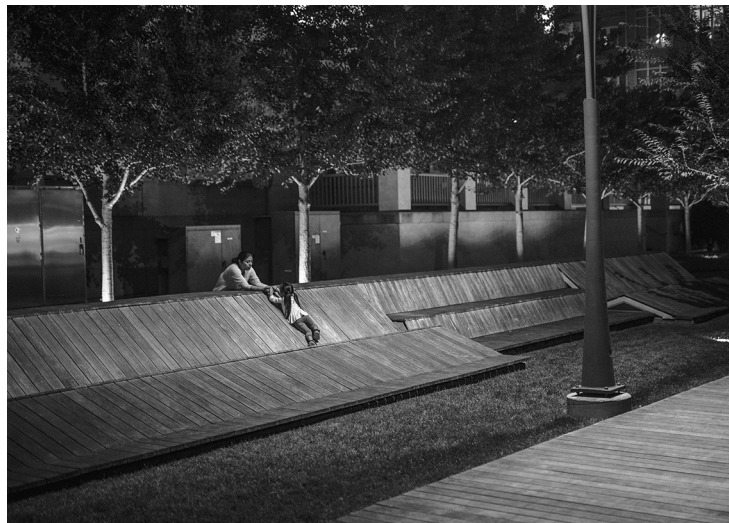
The term "appropriation" has been used in landscape architecture to describe the ways "the public" interprets enigmatic forms, making them their own.

BELOW

The CityDeck in action, but what sort of action, exactly? Belleme's photographs dislocate the seeming firmness of "program."

Whereas the vivid yoga image evinced a perky aura of successful placemaking that would make a client happy, Belleme's black-and-white photos seek to add grit and a more ad hoc, even illicit, use. Despite some "Look! Happy community!" pics, one picture of the CityDeck from Belleme finally reveals a frisson: a guy with tattoos on a bike, holding a drink late at night, who doesn't look super happy to be photographed. This alludes to what must be recognized as a vital truth of projects: They join the city as a social whole, in all its dimensions, including the covert. When we make the *mise-en-scène*, we must recognize that real appropriation can be transgressive, and that no amount of what Jane Jacobs called "eyes on the street" can interfere with that.

In the final brief chapter, Sara Zewde, a landscape architect and assistant professor at Harvard, proposes a relationship



between photography and design by introducing a schema comprising "what was," "what is," and "what *ought* to be" (my emphasis). Located at the end of the book as a reflection on its use of photography, Zewde's proposition that "both photography and design are acts of shaping how someone views the world" returns us to my initial question regarding the book as neutral document or biased representation, particularly in relation to Belleme's photographs. The black-and-white image is a signifier of the artful domain of photography with its expected focus on "the real."

Despite Belleme's wandering photographic gaze, the book was still shaped by Reed's way of seeing, which seems just short of a brief, their collaboration characterized by Reed as a "thoughtful silence and reflection...as meaningful as energized conversation" and by Belleme as an introduction "to a whole new way of viewing my surroundings." This leads to a photography of projects (or project contexts) that is refreshing and frustrating in equal measure.

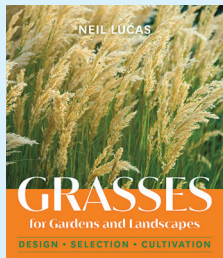
Mise-en-Scène is, ostensibly, a book that is about celebrating the real, yet the reality of Stoss's work was further away after reading. The job of interpretation is left with the reader, and I wondered if another French term might better suit the book's approach, which seems less about scene-setting and more about a deeply imbricated *milieu*: a scene in which a project sits in a complex network of relations of which you are one, but the project is still there—visible—nonetheless. ●

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BOOKS OF INTEREST

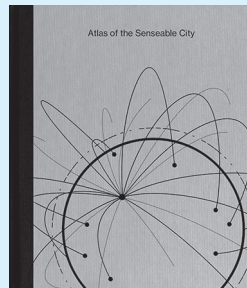


GRASSES FOR GARDENS AND LANDSCAPES

BY NEIL LUCAS; PORTLAND, OREGON:
TIMBER PRESS, 2023; 328 PAGES, \$50.

A compendium of grasses (plus some sedges and rushes), *Grasses for Gardens and Landscapes* presents just a fraction of the 10,000 different species within the plant family. The ornamental grass expert Neil Lucas guides readers through seasonal rhythms using a naturalist's approach combined with precise Latin species names. Photographs and long captions instruct best planting practices. Examples are wide ranging, from meadow grasses at Tongva Park in Santa Monica, California, to a leggy *Molinia* 'Transparent' in a Dorset, England, home garden. ●

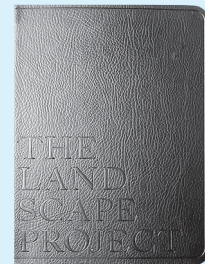
A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO DESIGN AT ALL SCALES.



ATLAS OF THE SENSEABLE CITY

BY ANTOINE PICON AND CARLO RATTI;
NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT, AND
LONDON: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS,
2023; 240 PAGES, \$35.

At first glance, the *Atlas of the Senseable City* may seem caught in the thrall of forward-looking smart cities, but this volume by Antoine Picon and Carlo Ratti is a reminder that mapping and quantified urbanism existed long before digital tools and sensing technologies. The authors use short histories to frame a collection of case studies produced by the Senseable City Lab, an MIT research initiative. The projects are wondrously graphic in their visualizations of datasets and cartography, and they illustrate the social and political impact of digital mapping on urban planning. ●



THE LANDSCAPE PROJECT

EDITED BY RICHARD J. WELLER AND
TATUM L. HANDS; NOVATO, CALIFORNIA:
ORO EDITIONS, 2022; 300 PAGES, \$35.

A collection of essays by the landscape architecture faculty at the Weitzman School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania, *The Landscape Project* is ambitious in its topical scope and aims for a critical repositioning of the field. In his introduction, Richard J. Weller argues for a systems approach in an Anthropocene age. As such, the book is organized into more than a dozen chapters with single-word titles such as "Data," by Robert Gerard Pietrusko; "Politics," by Billy Fleming; and "Purpose," by Rebecca Popowsky, ASLA, and Sarai Williams. These subjects suggest the urgencies landscape architects today need to address. ●