

# THE OTHER 20%

# JACQUES HERZOG

# AND REM KOOLHAAS

in conversation with Sabine von Fischer

Both Jacques Herzog and Rem Koolhaas are famous for their buildings and received Pritzker Prizes in subsequent years. Then, again in parallel, both architects have initiated major research initiatives in a different field, the countryside to be exact: Jacques Herzog and ETH Studio Basel have published a book called *Achtung: die Landschaft* in 2015, while Rem Koolhaas and AMO presented their report on *Countryside, the Future* alongside the 2020 Guggenheim exhibition.

**Sabine von Fischer:** You both claim that the countryside is a blind spot. But is it a blind spot for architects, or for society at large?

**Rem Koolhaas:** I would not say that this is a blind spot. I would also not say it's a blind spot of architects. Basically, my interest is more political. I'm simply saying that since 2007, when the UN warned everybody that already in the early 2000s 50% of mankind is living in cities, and that in 2030, or 2050, that might be 80%. This would create a situation that is completely insane – that the vast majority of mankind would be situated on very small areas while a very small percentage of mankind would be left to manage the enormous majority of the territory. That is the incentive of the entire effort. And it's nothing to do with claiming anything or with correcting blind spots. It's simply this observation that became alarming to me. And that was for me an important reason to try, almost on a political level, to create a kind of corrective.

**Jacques Herzog:** Back in 2000, we started a research project at the ETH Studio Basel on the urban topography of Switzerland with special attention given to the landscape. After six years of research the result was a publication in several



Setting up pixel plots: working from opposite corners of the outer rectangle inwards. (Linneke Bakker)



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Pixel plots from spring to summer.



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Pixel plot agriculture. Pages from *Countryside, A Report*.

volumes called *Switzerland: An Urban Portrait*. Cities and landscapes were analyzed and described not as opponents like in previous studies but as equally matched territorial and political agents. Switzerland is one of the most radical examples of totally urbanized landscapes in Europe.

On a global scale only 3% of our planet's territory is occupied by cities, but in fact almost everything and increasingly more is controlled and organized by humans. This is actually much more alarming than

anything else we may say about landscape or countryside, or any other term we may use, especially when looking into the future. It's not advisable to extend cities into the landscape, but vice versa: We must bring more landscape into the cities.

The 'city' is omnipresent, also in Switzerland, not just in the conventional understanding of urbanization, but with train lines, electrical plants, energy production, even with agriculture. The whole picturesque appearance that

had been previously overlooked or whose potential was somehow hidden. We tried, however, not to impose those identities. While travelling and exploring we 'discovered' them through a very intense, emotional and sometimes painful process of perception and discussion among ourselves. These discussions were often about 'borders' which run invisibly through cities and lands. Such borders can be of a social, political, or geographic nature, or even along botanical lines marking the edges of vegetation. Borders have a strong psychological side when two seemingly different entities are touching each other.

**SvF:** In your book *Achtung: die Landschaft* you call for the border as the place of intervention, that is where architects actually can act. How do you describe these borders? Are they clear? Are they getting blurred?

**JH:** Borders can be many things: physical walls or terrain, vague, visible or invisible. We have observed border areas between countries where both sides had amassed mountains of rubbish, built sewage plants, cemeteries and other unwelcome and undesirable installations. All things that create a distance between two opposite sides – a kind of *noli me tangere*. We find this in the Middle East between countries which have been in conflict against each other for a long time, but also between countries within Europe. Even in the trinational area around Basel where tram and train lines cross borders and commuters move back and forth between their homes and workplaces in France, Switzerland, and Germany, the border areas are a neglected subject. That is why we started to develop ideas for how to change that. Not necessarily as an architectural project, but rather with soft interventions like bus stops, vegetation, new paths, etc. These interventions would be given names, so the border gets a more tangible and accessible identity for both sides.

Borders are a fact. They separate two sides. That is an archaic pattern of human settlement. Borders are also why things evolve differently in different places. They are linked with what we call 'specificity' as an inevitable and ongoing process in the history and development of cities. We cannot change that, but we can transform borders, so people have a different and more conscious awareness of them. Borders can be crossed only when you are aware of their existence.

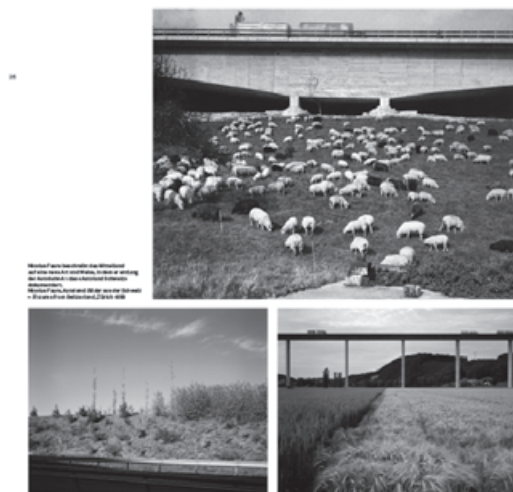
**SvF:** Can we still apply the term border when we talk about the duality of city and countryside?

**RK:** I would like to really resist acting like an architect. For me the issue is absolutely not how architects can reclaim anything or reposition themselves or any term that is strictly architectural. If the situation is right, we can do significant things. But I think currently the context is completely alien or completely hostile to the idea of any of these considerations. Let's take Holland. When I was young, in Holland there was a Ministry that had as its only function to order the country spatially; that has been abandoned. There was a Ministry for housing; that has been abandoned. So simply, every political ordering system has been abandoned.

And that is the chaotic situation in which we are now, and we all have to operate. Of course, we can operate with more or less intelligence and more or less sophistication, but I think that the crucial thing is to try to work on a more political framework. That is also an implication of the countryside. It's not only a statement about the world in its current form and what architects could contribute to it, it's also the situation that the world is facing a kind of hair-raising dilemma. We know, essentially what needs to be done in order to address the dilemma, but we have abandoned the institutions or the entities that can help us to deal with this dilemma. So again, I would emphasize that the political dimension of the countryside show is much stronger than the architectural element of it.

## THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF THE COUNTRYSIDE SHOW IS MUCH STRONGER THAN THE ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENT OF IT

**Ingemar Vollenweider:** As one of the organizers of this symposium, I would like to clarify the role of the architect. Do we have to build the countryside to save it? Construction is under way in many remote places, as you have shown, Rem. And you also, Jacques. The strategy of Jacques is to build the landscape first, as Central Park was first – coming back to *Delirious New York* – and then there were the building lots. It's a very conservative strategy, but it's about borders and it's about conserving and building very dynamically. So, don't you have to build to save?



### Darstellungen des Mittellands

Die Realität des Mittellandes wirkt stark ab von dem kollektiven Bild der Schweiz, das in den Köpfen vieler Menschen existiert. Dieses Können und Fotografieren haben jedoch in frühen Darstellungen diese weitgehend unbekannte urbane Region parzelliert. In ihrer wegweisenden Arbeit *Strahlungen*, Agglomerationen von 1969 zeigen Peter Fischli und David Weiss die suburbane Landschaft, die in den vorangehenden Jahrzehnten gebaut wurde, vorwiegend ein. Ihre Bilder enthalten die Einzigartigkeit des Suburbanen und veranschaulichen die sonderbare Atmosphäre, die in diesem Zwischenbereich von Stadt und Land herrscht. Die zufällige Abwesenheit menschlicher Präsenz, der Mangel an Orientierungspunkten oder natürlichen Landschaftselementen, diese die wenig gleich anmutenden modernen Wohnblöcke und die gewöhnliche Architektur charakterisieren Orte bei jeder zeitlichen oder kulturellen Identität. Der umgebende ökonomische Raum ist auf Parkplätze oder Verkehrsinfrastruktur reduziert. Werkspläne von Einkaufszentren, Auslieferungszentren oder Banken zeichnen sich ab, was für den goldenen Markt die örtliche Wirtschaft verdrängt hat, während die allgegenwärtigen Anzeigen und Verkehrsschilder, die auf Antriebsleistungen wie Zug, LKW und Zürich hinweisen, nahelegen, dass dieses Wohngebiet nicht als Ort mit eigener Gewerbebeziehung existiert, sondern nur in der Verbindung mit anderen, weiteren Orten. Der Natur, obwohl vorhanden, kommt die Rolle einer ästhetischen Dekoration zu, eingestreut zwischen Betonplatten. Der Wandel der Jahrzehnte ist der einzige verbliebene Hinweis auf eine Beziehung zwischen den Siedlungen, Agglomerationen und ihrer umgebenden Landschaft.

In seinem Werk *Arbeiten* (1986) und *Arbeitspaar A* (2004) bezieht sich der Fotograf Nicolas Farni die Zerschlagung der Landschaft, die sich aus der Entwicklung der Autobahnen und der daraus folgenden infrastrukturellen Erschließung (Logistik, Elektrizität, Infrastrukturalien) ergibt. Seine Fotos spielen im Gegensatz zu Schweizerischen Bildern Infrastruktur und Natur ins Bild und zeigen einen landschaftlichen Veränderungsprozess, der sich weit entfernt von den üblichen Agglomerationen abspielt.

Jede Region hat ihre eigene Anatomie und Topografie (...). Es ist der Durchbruch an öffentlichen Märkten, der es dem Bauenden ermöglicht, das Wissen eines Landes zu erfassen, seine Wege zu planen und sein Ziel zu finden.

Ingemar Vollenweider, 2012

In seinem Bildband *Mittelland* (2012) zeichnet der junge Schweizer Fotograf Michael Basser anhand einer Serie von Fotografien von Häusern ein nichternes Porträt, das die Eigenheiten der Region als Ganzes enthält. Sein Blick für zersplitterte, über Wohnarchitektur qualitativ unverbunden durch das durchgänglich ruhige Wälder auf den Anbauern nimmt der Betrachter direkt die Feinheiten des suburbanen Gefüges, das gesamte Fehlen einer übergeordneten Planung und die Wirksamkeit einzelner Elemente wahr.

Wie bereits in der Publikation *Die Schweiz. Ein abstraktes Porträt des 87th Studio* illustriert wurde, kann die Schweiz nicht länger über die städtische Dimension von Stadt und Land definiert werden, sondern sollte vielmehr als ein vielfältiges urbanes Gebiet wahrgenommen werden. Frühere Projekte und Visionen für das Mittelland haben







Footage from the Balo's escape, crossing the Mediterranean on a Dinghy.

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Hussein Balo owned a chicken farm near Mosul. He had to escape ISIS.



Old Manheim: condemned by the growth of the mine next door, the local population leaves the village.  
(Horbert Ganser, "Cat Invasion in the Ghost Village," slide)

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#### Countryside, A Report.

**JH:** Yes, I agree. I would especially highlight science – without science, we would not survive. Despite the progress in digital and biological technology, there is, paradoxically, a growing mistrust in developed countries against science. However, I think we need to attribute an even bigger role to science and technology in order to preserve and also to transform landscapes.

**RK:** Yes, I agree there. Because it's not the artificiality which is the thing to emphasize in Holland or in Switzerland, it's also the contribution of science. And actually, the exhibition ends on a laboratory in Germany where they are getting closer and closer to realizing fusion, as an alternative form of nuclear energy. So we really stuck our neck out in making the claim; also, for the importance of science and how it will be crucial in the next 30 years.

**SvF:** City, countryside, and nature – do you see them as dialectical opposites? Or are they symbiotic systems?

**RK:** I think that right now, it would be very productive to consider them in a single framework, and not as opposites. There may be a time that this might be useful again but I think that today it's really crucial to look at the overall picture rather than build on an opposition.

## WE CAN ONLY IMPROVE OUR HUMAN CONDITION AND OUR LIFE IN CITIES IF WE BETTER ABSORB THE 'COUNTRYSIDE', PROTECT IT MORE AND ABUSE IT LESS

**JH:** There I agree, we certainly share that concept. If we don't see City and Landscape – or rather the built and the not-built territory – in opposition but within one framework, we should grant both these territories equal attention and importance for our survival on this planet. We can only improve our human condition and our life in cities if we better absorb the 'countryside', protect it more and abuse it less.

*This conversation took place in June 2020 as part of the Dortmund Architecture Days, an event created in 1975 by Josef Paul Kleihues and, since 2020, continued by his successors to the Chair of Urban Planning at the TU Dortmund, Anna Jessen and Ingemar Vollenweider. This year's discussion was the first one held electronically via Zoom, with all discussion partners in remote locations. It gathered a wide range of positions with the intent to map the current state of architecture in society at large: [www.bauwesen.tu-dortmund.de/sb/de/Aktuell/](http://www.bauwesen.tu-dortmund.de/sb/de/Aktuell/)*

## Colophon Volume 57

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**Nonprofessional** features designers, curators, writers, architects and students who took part in the Non-Professional Practice course at Harvard GSD. With Åbåke, Antwaun Sargent, Arta Perezic, Carlos J. Soto, Connie Trinh, Durga Chew-Bose, Elif Erez, Eva Lavranou, Faris Al-Shathir, Felix Burrichter, Jeremy Benson, Jennifer Bonner, Jiangpu Meng, JIM JOE, Karen Wong, Klelia Siska, Kofi Akakpo, Malkit Shoshan, Oana Stanescu, PLAYLAB, INC, Troy Conrad Therrien and Yasong Zhou.

**Peripheral Visions** occur away from the center of gaze, crucial for sensing motion and detecting threats. The vast majority of the visual field is Peripheral Visions. Look away.

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