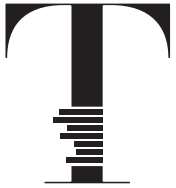
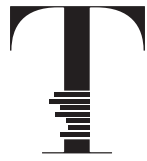


Robert Kane

A Landscape of Contradiction:

Connecting nature and industry with a refuge in the Apuan Alps







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Contradictions as a Tool:

Towards an Ecocritical Approach to Urban/Landscape Design

Prof. Giulio Giovannoni

The landscape of the Apuan Alps is an emblem of a schizophrenic modernity, a modernity that allows hundreds of quarries to operate in one of the most beautiful landscapes in Europe, while setting aside some of its parts in order to secure them and protect them from development and speculation. In a regulatory oxymoron that is as strident as the water saws incessantly cutting through the white blocks of this immense marmiferous basin, authorized open-air quarries coexist with protected natural areas of total preservation, separated by only a few meters. The extreme polarization of this landscape, a contrasted landscape of black and white, of devastation and preservation, is one of the countless outputs of the regulatory and administrative madness that governs our contemporary society. It is the result of the blind and partial actions of sector plans that are administered and governed by different branches of the public administration, unable to communicate with each other.

Robert Kane's project is placed with extreme sensitivity and listening ability in this difficult context, avoiding improbable regulatory moves and fully exploiting the design potential of contradiction and crisis. I believe that this work has a paradigmatic value for five main reasons:

- it interprets recycling and reuse as a re-signification process,
- it adopts a multi-sensorial approach,
- it suspends judgment on the man/environment relationship,
- it exploits contradictions rather

er than trying to solve them, • it conceives the project as a tool for ecological and social criticism.

Urban/landscape recycling as a re-signification process. The problem of reclaiming abandoned quarries is widespread, and therefore countless projects exist for the environmental and landscape restoration of these spaces. Quarrying activities are also very ancient, with archeological evidence dating them back to prehistoric times. The marmiferous basin of Carrara was home to some of the main quarries of the Roman Empire. The settlement structure of this entire territory has a historical matrix that was largely determined by mining activities (Giorgieri 1992).

There is no doubt that the opening of a quarry represents an enormous wound for a natural landscape, modifying its geomorphology, altering its fundamental ecological relations, and considerably reducing its biodiversity. For this reason, many quarry restoration projects consist in huge actions of environmental/landscape reshaping. Illustrative of such an approach is the project carried out by Jean-Charles Adolphe Alphand and Pierre Barillet-Deschamps between 1863 and 1867 in the Buttes-Chaumont Park in Paris. Its construction involved massive works: an ad hoc railway was built to transport 200,000 cubic meters of land, a lake was excavated, and dynamite was used to reshape the rocky outcrops in order to create a picturesque effect. The site's mining history was totally erased and the site was completely remodelled. A more recent example

is the recovery of the Negev Phosphate Works quarry in the Negev Desert in Israel, which involved approximately 40 million cubic meters of earth movements and the creation of a series of artificial slopes (De Poli, Incerti 2014, 36-39).

Robert's project, on the contrary, adopts a different approach. The large marble steps of the quarry are appreciated for their intrinsic monumentality, becoming an *objet trouvé* of great interest, to be used for what it is rather than to be erased through huge geomorphological alterations. Such a design approach mainly implies a conceptual work of re-signification. This consists in reversing the perspective with which the quarry is looked at: a reversal of perspective analogous to that operated by Duchamp with his famous work 'Fountain', the ceramic urinal whose simple overturning allowed it to be considered as a work of art, a ready-made. Thanks to this reversal of perspective, the enormous marble steps cut into the mountains during the excavation process come to be appreciated for their monumentality and beauty. Although their monumentality is in a sense intrinsic and objective, only a 'resignifying gaze', that is a way of looking that goes beyond the environmental devastation produced by the quarry, allows one to appreciate its power and potential. Such a gaze and attitude is unquestionably one of the key ingredients for effectively coping with the recycling of post-industrial landscapes and more generally with the management and design our largely devastated contemporary living environment.



A multi-sensorial approach. The aforementioned “risignifying gaze” is made possible by a multisensory reading of space. Perception studies are historically featured by the dominion of the visual (Stokes Biggs 2017). Since the late 1960s, however, several scholars have tried to overcome the limitations of these traditional approaches. The concepts of ‘soundscape’ (Southworth 1969, Murray Schafer 1977), ‘smellscape’ (Porteous 1985), ‘tactile space’ (Carolan 2007), among others, have allowed us to deepen our understanding of the sound, olfactory and tactile dimensions of space. The different senses also appear in Kane’s work, which investigates space through a holistic bodily experience. His reading shows the existence of an interesting symmetry between the soundscape and visual landscape and of the Apuan Alps: both these senses reflect the natural/anthropic contradiction that constitutes the distinctive element of this place’s identity. Kane’s analysis and project are conceived as a complex experience. The quarry is reached on foot after a long walk and after an overnight stay in a small mountain hut. This bodily and multisensory understanding of the place enters the project and pervades it. The Alpine hut designed in the disused quarry is not only a place of rest, observation and meditation, but a window on the contemporary world and society.

Contradictions as design opportunities. For a long time urban planning has been dominated by the use of organic metaphors equating the city and the country to sick or-

ganisms, and architects and planners to doctors who are in charge of curing such diseases (Secchi 1984, Boyer 1983). These approaches are ideological in that, by aiming at maintaining the status quo (or a state prior to the alleged disruptions/perturbations), they promote the interests of the more economically and culturally privileged social groups. Obviously, plans using such rhetorical devices are incapable of playing the curative and repairing role they attribute to themselves. Secchi shows how entire sequences of urban plans justify their role by systematically accusing previous plans and policy-makers of having altered a preexisting balance between space, society and nature. This mechanism is almost identical to that illustrated by Raymond Williams in *The City and the Country* (1973). According to Williams successive generations of writers and poets regret the loss of a previous balance in the relationship between man and nature, all attributing blame to the era in which they live. The British scholar, being ironic on this continuous tendency to regretting the good old days, imagines a ladder moving in time and incessantly finding in all ages the same basic arguments. Although human action often causes serious injuries to the environment and to ecological systems, nostalgic approaches to spatial planning and management are almost always ideological and ineffective. Kane seems to be fully aware of this, as he accepts the complexity of the environmental and ecological crisis, and tries to exploit its contradictions to the advantage of his project. Rather

than acting as a fig leaf that hides the misdeeds of a supposedly wicked mankind, the project becomes a window on today’s world, a tool that permits us to grasp and appreciate the complexity of our own living environment.

The project as a tool for ecological and social criticism. Although avoiding any normative and moral stance, Kane’s analysis and proposal is a powerful tool of ecological and social criticism. While the opinions expressed by many town planners and environmentalists on the ecological and environmental devastation produced by quarries are open and manifest, the ecological and social criticism of Kane’s project is subtle and implicit. Its strength and credibility derives from the intellectual, analytical and design path previously described and from its embodied and multisensory approach.

Ultimately, Kane’s work interprets with remarkable skills and sensitivity what, borrowing from literary studies (e.g. Garrard 2004, Iovino 2016), we could define an **ecocritical approach to urban/landscape design**: that is an approach that uses the project in an open, sensitive and effective way in order to address the complex socio-spatial situations that face contemporary societies.

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