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PLURALISING NATURE – RETHINKING THE SKJERN RIVER RESTORATION PROJECT

THOMAS JUEL CLEMMENSEN

Abstract

Denmark is recognised for its democratic approach to planning, and for the idea of planning for the common good. This interest in the common good and in common values also seems to be reflected in the way that the restoration of nature is planned and managed, suggesting that there is one common “nature” that everyone can agree on. But nature restoration is far from being an unproblematic undertaking. As with any other type of heritage production, it can be the source of dissonance. As exemplified by the Skjern River Restoration Project, one perception of a landscape and its value as “nature” can suppress other valid perceptions, in conflict with the need for different groups of people to be able to identify with the same territory. However, planning for the common good, in the case of nature restoration, does not necessarily mean planning for one common nature. Understanding and working with a multi-layered landscape might provide an alternative approach to nature restoration that allows for different nature perceptions to coexist to a greater extent. In this paper, this idea of “pluralising” nature will be unfolded through a design project that exemplifies how a part of the Skjern River Delta could have been restored with greater sensitivity toward the most recent history of the site, which still plays an essential role for the local community and its sense of identity.

Keywords:

nature restoration, dissonant
heritage, landscape transforma-
tion, landscape architecture

Introduction

In 1968, the largest and most advanced land reclamation project in the history of Denmark was completed in the Skjern River Delta. 26 kilometres of meandering river were converted into 19 kilometres of embanked canal, and 3,900 hectares of meadow and wetland were turned into arable land with the help of an extensive drainage system. From 1999 to 2003, the same site was part of the largest and most expensive nature restoration project in the history of Denmark – the Skjern River Restoration Project. 2.7 million cubic meters of soil were moved in the effort to restore a more original natural environment in the Skjern River Delta. This effort was awarded the prestigious *Europa Nostra Prize* for “conserving European cultural heritage” (Danish Nature Agency, 2005). However, it seems that in this case the conservation of one cultural heritage was at the expense of another. While the meanders of the Skjern River were reconstructed according to its assumed course in 1871, the embanked canal, which was one of the main features and symbols of the land reclamation project of the 1960s, was reduced to unrecognisable traces of the past. This powerful gesture suggests how parts of the local farming community, maintaining a primarily productive relationship to nature, were suppressed and overruled by different interest groups who shared a more romantic and recreational relationship to nature. Furthermore, following the restoration, the river delta also became a national and even international landscape, challenging its rootedness in local identity.

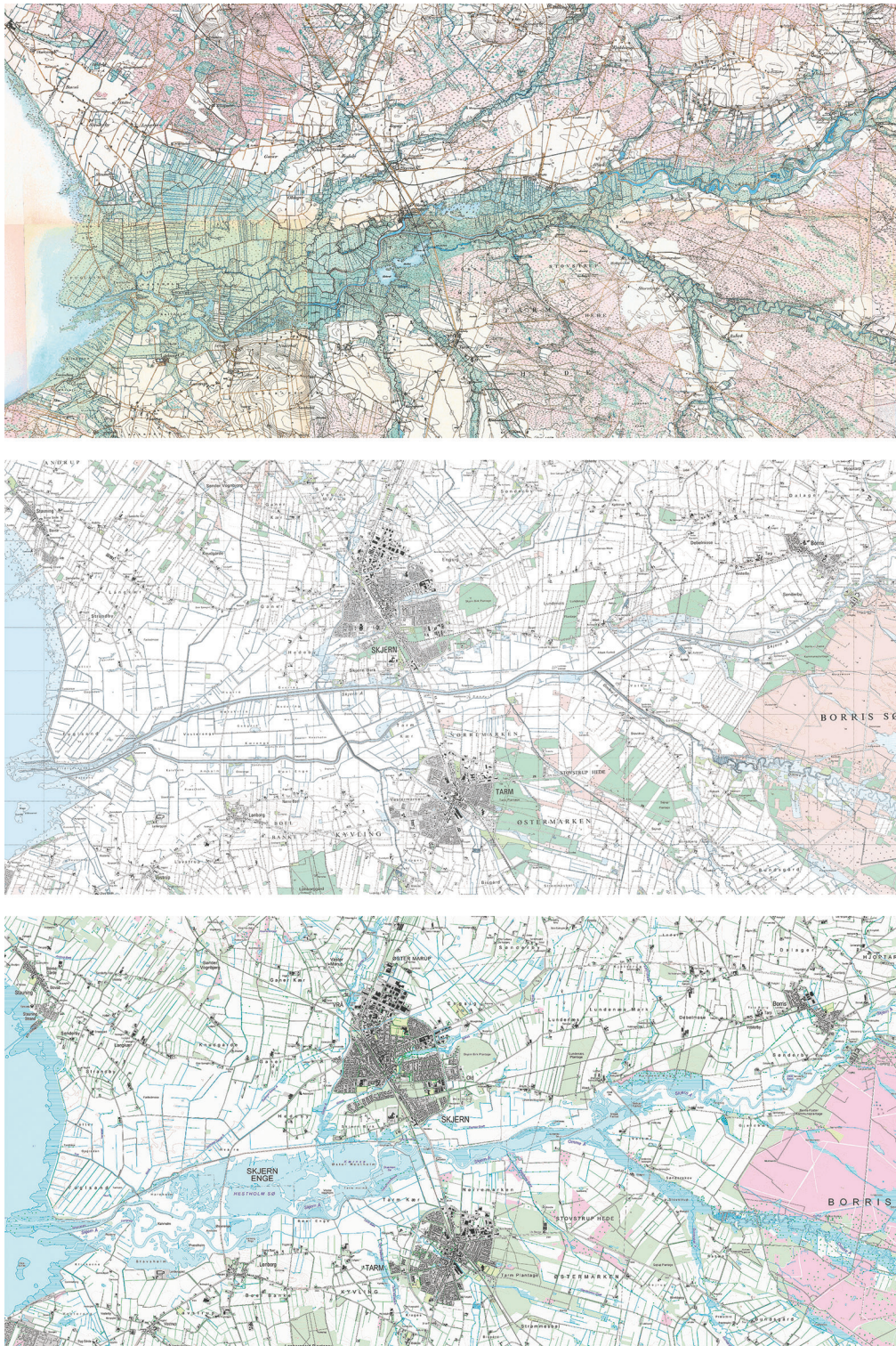


Figure 1

Transformation of The Skjern River Delta 1842–2012. Source: Danish Geodata Agency (2014).

These three maps reveal the major landscape transformations that have taken place in the Skjern River Delta between 1842 and 2012. The map at the top (1842–1899) shows the huge areas of meadow and wetland that once characterised the delta landscape. The map in the middle (1977–1994) shows the dramatic changes that followed the largest and most advanced land reclamation project in the history of Denmark – almost all meadow and wetland disappeared in the process. The map at the bottom (2012) shows the equally dramatic changes that followed the largest and most expensive nature restoration project in the history of Denmark. Huge areas of wetland now surround a new meandering river, while the reclaimed land north of the former main canal, which was not part of the nature restoration project, remains as arable land supported by a drainage system.



In many ways the Skjern River Restoration Project exemplifies the complexity that characterises nature restoration projects in general, and shows how difficult it can be in reality to comply with the ambition to integrate cultural and natural heritage that is built into the European Landscape Convention (ELC). According to Kenneth R. Olwig, who has written extensively about landscape and its social and ideological dimensions, and has studied the restoration of the Skjern River Delta, the project illustrates how impossible it is to separate cultural and physical factors when restoring nature. Restoring the meandering river without also restoring the traditional meadow farming, with its grazing cattle, would obviously never recreate the kind of landscape that disappeared along with the massive land reclamation of the late 1960s, with the transition to modern grain farming (see Olwig, 1984; 1995; 2005). However, the concern of the author is not so much this inability to recreate a certain type of landscape, but rather the phenomenon of reluctance to accept the modern land reclamation project as an important and valuable part of the local history. According to the ELC, landscapes are a foundation of people's identity, and the aspirations of the public need to be included in the formulation of landscape quality objectives (Council of Europe, 2000, art. 5c). Was it strictly necessary to erase most of the landscape features associated with modern land reclamation when restoring nature in the river delta? In order, to examine this question, it makes sense to take a closer look at the link between nature restoration and "heritage production", and at the concept of "dissonant heritage" (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996).

Figure 2
Water crossing. Source: Heath Society (Hedeselskabet) (1965).
This aerial photo shows part of the extensive drainage system that was constructed as part of the ambitious land reclamation project in the Skjern River Delta. In total, 26 kilometres of the meandering river were converted into 19 kilometres of embanked canal, and 3,900 hectares of meadow and wetland became arable land. This highly engineered landscape also featured a "water crossing" where the Gæner River was directed under the Skjern River. Today most traces of these remarkable landscape features have disappeared, and in the process of nature restoration, curved lines have replaced straight lines.



If one accepts that heritage is not the same as history, but rather a contemporary product informed by history, it is clear that the same area or object could be part of different heritages, created by different groups of people for different reasons. Inheritance, logically and potentially, involves disinheritance – “our” heritage is not necessarily “their” heritage. As a consequence, all heritage production can be associated with a degree of “dissonance” that involves a discordance or lack of agreement and consistency between elements used by different groups in the process of heritage production (ibid.). Much the same could be said in relation to nature restoration: if one accepts that nature does not exist outside of culture, as something that can be restored to its original state, but as a contemporary product created and managed with certain objectives in mind, nature restoration, like heritage production, is prone to same kind of dissonance – “our” nature is not necessarily “their” nature.

Dissonance in heritage production can be managed in a number of different ways, but often (consciously or unconsciously) involves some form of denial, neglect, destruction, reinterpretation or marginalisation. In the course of these processes, one interpretation of the past often ends up dominating and suppressing other potential interpretations, or else different interpretations are tolerated, but managed by separation (ibid.). In projects of nature restoration, this can be observed in the way that one understanding or reading of a landscape is often foregrounded at the expense of others, or when landscapes are zoned in order to accommodate different perceptions of nature. In both cases, dissonance is managed in a way that divides rather than unites, challenging the very

Figure 3

The newly restored Skjern River Delta.
Source: Jan Kofod Winther (2002).

This aerial photo shows the estuary of the new meandering river and a part of the newly restored river delta. 2.7 million cubic meters of earth were moved in the effort to restore the original nature. While the meanders of the river were reconstructed according to its assumed course in 1871, the embanked canal, which was the main feature and symbol of the land reclamation project from the 1960s, was reduced to unrecognisable traces of the past. In the end, however, it was a new kind of nature that was created, not least because a significant part of the former meadow and wetland had sunk on account of years of drainage, and had therefore turned into shallow lakes when the natural ground water table was re-established.

idea of a common nature shared by different groups of people. However, planning for the common good, in the case of nature restoration, does not necessarily mean planning for one common nature. Understanding and working with a multi-layered landscape might provide an alternative approach to nature restoration that allows for different perceptions of nature to coexist to a greater extent, and for different groups of people to identify with the same territory – providing, in this way, a more inclusive approach to the management of dissonance in nature restoration. Parts of this discussion have previously been published in the paper *The management of dissonance in nature restoration* (see Clemmensen, 2014).

Nature restoration as heritage production

We all know what nature is, so long as we do not have to define it. As a consequence, we refer to nature in its definite form with the greatest feeling of confidence when it remains undefined. The nature that we refer to is simply the nature that we prefer to relate to, whether or not it is reasonable to define it as such. Therefore, in a cultural context, it is more important to speak of nature “perceptions”, rather than of nature “concepts” or “definitions”. Nature perceptions are not definitions of what nature is; they are primarily formulations of a relationship between man and nature. In most cases, our relationship with nature does not build on a particular, let alone a clear, concept of nature. On the contrary, concepts of nature are often constructed backwards from the basis of our relationship to nature; the relationship we have, believe ourselves to have, or want to have. As such, perceptions of nature are often expressions of the culture that created them, rather than of the nature that is being perceived. They indicate both an identity and a framework for action, both what we “are” and what we “do” in relation to nature (Larsen, 1996; see also Cronon, 1995). It is precisely this relationship with identity that makes it helpful to understand nature restoration in the same terms as heritage production. The question of what kind of nature to restore is a question of cultural identity; what kind of relationship do we have, believe ourselves to have, or want to have with nature? As with heritage production, nature restoration is a tool that nations, societies, communities, and individuals use to express, facilitate, and construct a sense of identity, self and belonging, in which the “the power of place” is invoked in its representational sense to give physical reality to these expressions and experiences.

The term “nature restoration” itself does not reveal this forward-looking aspect of identity construction, since it expresses the idea of bringing something back, of restoring nature by restoring a landscape to a former state. This idea of creating nature through landscape reconstruction can be linked to a particular reading of natural history formulated by the biologist Eugene P. Odum in his classic work *Fundamentals of ecology*

(1953). Odum describes nature's ideal history without human interference, a situation in which each ecosystem ends its evolution in a stable state that is self-sustaining and in equilibrium with its physical habitat. According to this understanding, humans and their interventions constitute a potential disturbance of the natural evolution towards self-sustainability and equilibrium. Accordingly, nature can be brought back on track by restoring the natural habitat to the state it had before human interference (Fritzboøger, 2009). This idea of an ecological equilibrium has since been challenged by a new theory of ecological dynamics, undermining the popular idea that an area left to itself will revert "back" to an original nature. If the human impact on an area is ceased or reduced, nature does not return to an original state, but rather evolves into new nature. The clock cannot be turned back; we do not restore original nature, but we create it anew, we actively transform our surroundings with certain objectives in mind (Näsman and Odgaard, 2002). Most often this is a process of landscape reconstruction in which some features and characteristics are deemed more authentic and valuable than others. As will be demonstrated by the case of the Skjern River Restoration Project, these kinds of landscape reconstructions can be the source of dissonance and direct conflict.

The battle of the Skjern River Delta

The Skjern River, Denmark's biggest river in terms of flow, has always been known for its floods, and many projects have been initiated over the years to control its forces. This battle against the uncontrollable water finally ended in 1968, when the largest and most advanced land reclamation project in the history of Denmark was completed. In 1977, a monument was raised in honour of the four local landowners who had been involved in the cultivation of the river delta since 1940, and had promoted the project. In 1987, only two decades after the extensive cultivation of the river delta was completed, the Danish Parliament made a principal decision to restore part of the river and its delta to "more natural" conditions. The major changes in the delta following its cultivation not only proved to cause serious environmental problems in the fjord where the river ended its course, but the quality of the new arable land was in large part also steadily declining because the earth was sinking and becoming more and more compact. By 1987, more than half the new land was sunken – in some places by more than one metre – on account of the decomposition of the former peat soil, and according to a technical assessment, there was a serious risk that farming would become uneconomical unless a new deeper drainage system was implemented. It was these circumstances that finally led to the decision to restore the river and its self-cleaning process.

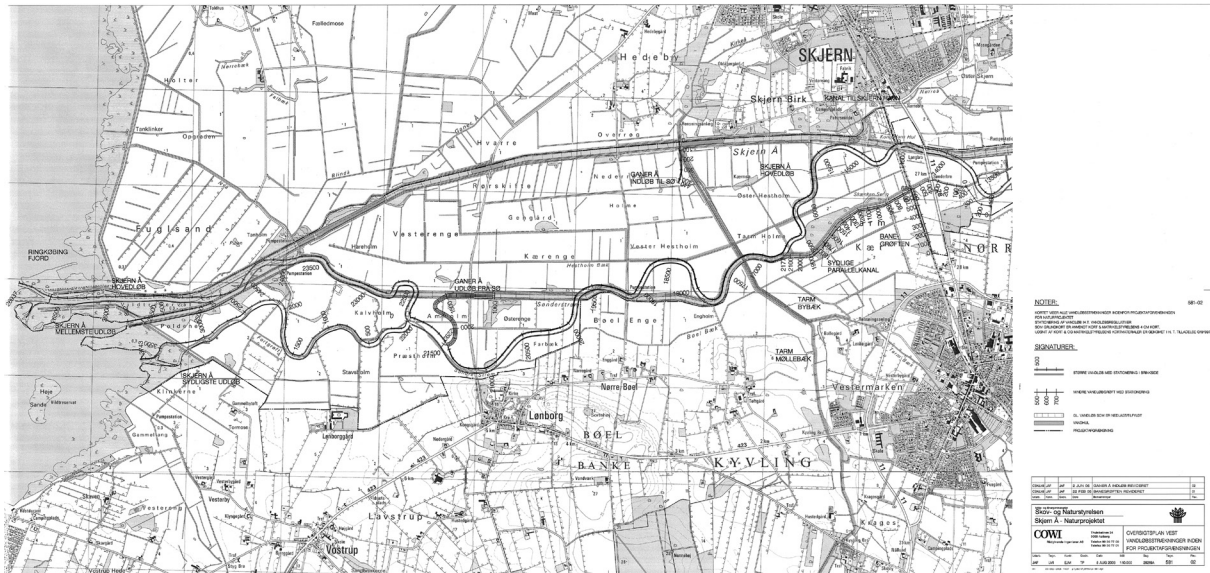
This parliamentary decision marked the beginning of a new battle, which unexpectedly continued for twelve years; hence it was not until 1999

that the dredgers once again moved into the delta. Despite the fact that the reclaimed land was sinking and that, for the most part, it had been sold to the state at a very reasonable price, local opposition to the restoration project continued, indicating that something more than property rights and monetary issues was at stake. The conflict also concerned different cultures and colliding perceptions of nature: the cultural landscape of the Skjern River Delta constituted a central element in the local population's self-image and identity creation (Fritzboøger, 2009). Many of the local farmers, whose families had been involved in the continued cultivation of the region's heath- and wetlands for generations, found it difficult to understand and accept the proposed "extensification" in land use. According to them, the cultivation of the river delta was a victory over the uncertainty that was associated with traditional meadow farming. Consequently, some of them saw the nature restoration project as an insult to their forefathers' legacy, and to Danish farming culture in general (Clausen, 2007). However, it should be noted that the local population was itself quite divided concerning both the reclamation and the restoration of the Skjern River Delta. The straightening of the river turned what had been a kind of common meadowland, with multiple resources accessible to many, into mono-cultural drained fields belonging to one particular segment of the population, that is, the farmers (see Olwig, 1995).

During the twelve-year battle between opponents to the project and its proponents, the main argument for going ahead with the restoration project and the re-meandering of the river changed from "restoring the self-cleaning process of the river" to "restoring the original nature of the river delta". An environmental assessment had concluded that recreating the meandering course of the river would have only minimal impact on its self-cleaning process (Environmental Protection Agency, 1990), but this did not change the project, only the argument for its completion. This adjustment in argumentation illustrates the symbolic importance of the meandering river, a symbol associated with a more "original" landscape and a wilder nature. For the environmental authorities, it became less important whether the river became self-cleaning or was simply restored: the most important point was that the project was implemented because they wanted to be identified with a high-profile case of nature restoration (Clausen, 2007). Once the battle was over and the re-meandering of the river complete, the internal differences among the proponents of the restoration project, reflecting their different perceptions of nature, became more apparent than before. In the official user group appointed by the Minister for the Environment, there were heated discussions about the future use of the new river delta. To what degree should it be used for recreational purposes or should it, alternatively, remain as undisturbed nature? (Fritzboøger, 2009)

Given the amount of conflict and dissonance that characterised this

case, in which one cultural landscape was in a very literal sense replaced by another cultural landscape, it seems clear that alternative approaches to nature restoration that are more sensitive to different perceptions of nature are worth exploring.



Rethinking the Skjern River Restoration

In spring 2014 the author assigned a group of undergraduate students from the Aarhus School of Architecture the task of exploring how the nature of the Skjern River Delta could have been restored without completely jeopardising the large-scale land reclamation project of the 1960s. Rather than erasing the landscape features associated with the land reclamation in the attempt to recreate the former nature of the river delta, the students were asked to consider these features as an important cultural layer of the landscape; a layer that not only bears witness to an important period of local history but which could also play a valuable role in the new nature, encouraging reflection about different perceptions of nature. Accordingly, one of the main objectives was to investigate how features of the modern drainage system could be maintained, not just as traces of the past, but also as vital elements in the new delta landscape. As part of the assignment the students were asked to consider the following questions: how can different perceptions of nature and different land use interests be accommodated in the same territory through landscape architectural interventions? How can ideas of the “cultivated” and the “wild” be combined in ways that help us reflect on our complex relationship with the natural world and its processes?

The students were introduced to John Dixon Hunt and his idea of the three natures to unfold the idea of creating places of reflection. Follow-

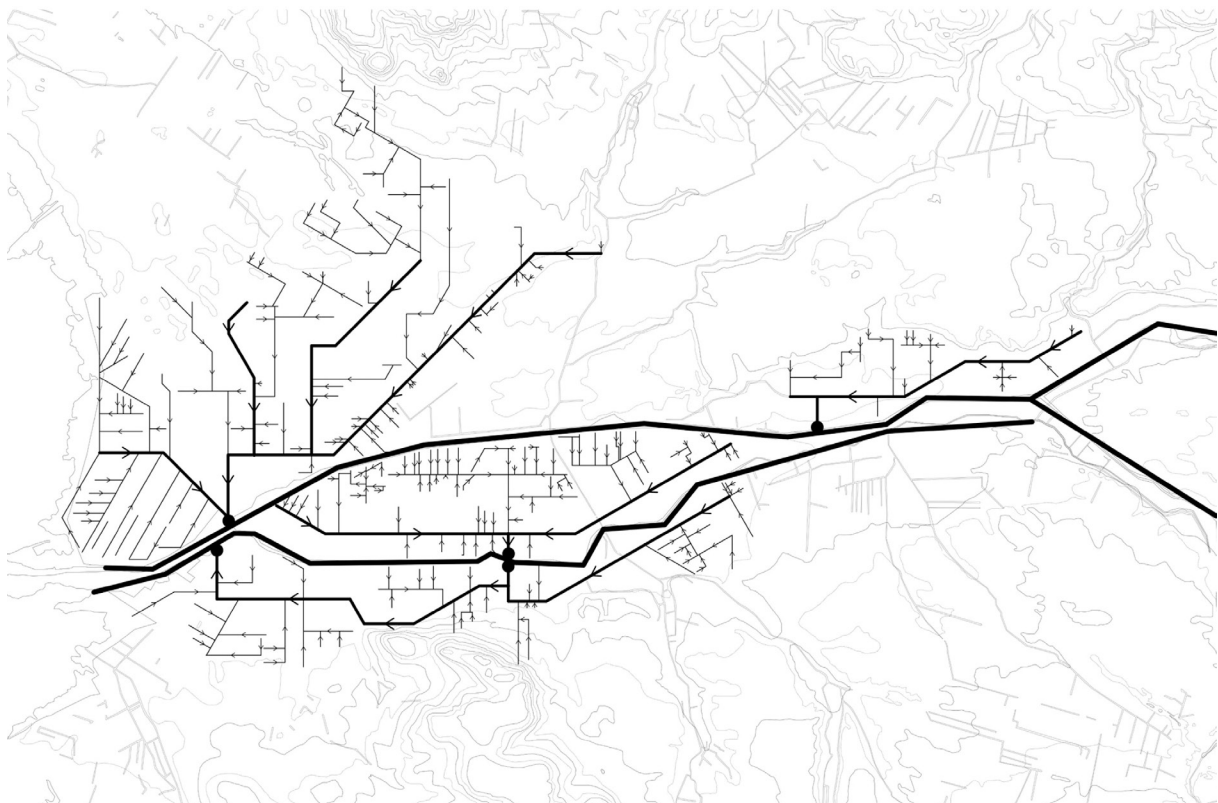
Figure 4
Superimposition of old and new.
Source: COWI (2005).
The proposed course for a restored river superimposed onto the old reclaimed delta. The illustration captures a fiction in which both past and future are present. This dual condition constituted the point of departure for the discussed assignment given to a group of undergraduate students from the Aarhus School of Architecture. The map was introduced to assist the students in taking a multi-layered approach to landscape transformation.

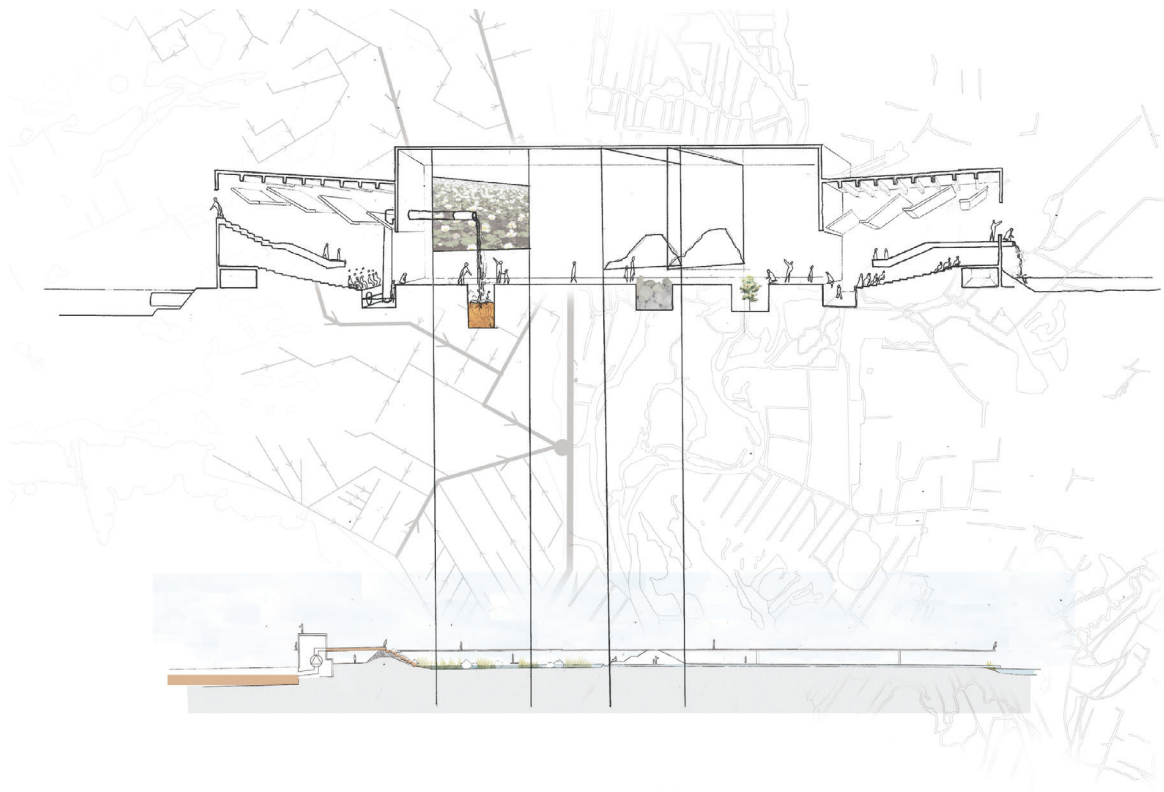
ing Hunt, “first nature” represents the given world and can be associated with the wild, or the idea of wilderness. In contrast, “second nature” represents the world transformed by humans, or the cultural landscape, and can be associated with both agriculture and urban development – all the interventions related to human survival and habitation. The third stage of nature represents those human interventions that go beyond what is required by the necessities or practices of agriculture and urban settlement, and which can be associated with the garden. Apart from the clear schema in this trichotomy, the place of the garden within the structure of the three natures is complex, and the third nature of gardens is best considered as existing in terms of the other two (Hunt, 2000).

This garden theory not only involves a liberation of the formal aesthetic that often clings to the idea of the garden, it also identifies the garden as an important place of reflection, interrogation, and doubt concerning the relationship between the given world and the world transformed – the latter being a place that re-presents, simulates, and reveals what we are doing to the given world (Descombes, 2012). Accordingly, the students were asked to consider the river delta more as a garden and less as a nature reserve, and to be very conscious about revealing changes in the river delta, exposing how different views of the given world are continuously reconfiguring the landscape. Hence the existing canal should be preserved as a canal, not only because it could be regarded as an essential part of the local cultural heritage, but also, more importantly, in order to reveal what has changed.

Figure 5
The Skjern River Delta drainage system.
Student project by Anne Monrad Nielsen, 2014.

Skjern River Delta drainage system with its pumping stations and extensive network of drainage canals, which was established as part of the land reclamation of the 1960s. Three of the five pumping stations are still functioning today, serving parts of the reclaimed delta that were not included in the nature restoration project. This mapping not only provided essential insight into the complexity and extent of the land reclamation project, but also helped to identify interesting sites for landscape architectural interventions.





The Ochre Garden

In her project the Ochre Garden, Anne Monrad Nielsen explores how the idea of the garden as a “third nature” could have been adopted in the restoration of the Skjern River Delta. When asked to formulate and illustrate an individual concept within the overall framework of the assignment, Nielsen proposed the working title “Staging the Staging”, using the theatre as a metaphor for what was happening in the river delta. According to Nielsen, the newly restored nature there is in many ways just as manipulated or “staged” as the meticulously cultivated fields found outside the restored river delta. This is a point of view shared by the local nature guide, who has described the delta as a kind of “postcard nature”, demanding a high level of management (Lisborg, 2014). By staging the staging, Nielsen wanted to create an opportunity to move backstage behind the scenes, to enter into the “theatre machine”.

In order to explore this concept and develop it into an elaborate design scheme, Nielsen choose to work with a particular section of the northern canal constituting an interesting threshold between two very different parts of the delta – one that is restored, and one that remains in its reclaimed condition. On this particular site, it is still possible to experience an active pumping station lifting ochre polluted drainage water from the reclaimed land into the restored river, a strange situation considering that this same water was formerly directed underneath the northern canal, which functioned as the main river before the nature restoration

Figure 6

Nature restoration as a theatre – staging the staging. Student project by Anne Monrad Nielsen, 2014.

The theatre is used as a metaphor for what is going on in the Skjern River Delta. According to Nielsen, the newly restored nature in many ways is just as manipulated or “stage” as the meticulously cultivated fields found outside the restored river delta.

This concept is reflected via the mirroring section of a theatre. By “staging the staging”, Nielsen proposed to create an opportunity to move backstage behind the scenes, to enter into the “theatre machine”.

project, protecting its freshwater environment and, in particular, the valuable salmon, from the poisonous ochre compounds. According to Nielsen, it is precisely these kinds of paradoxical situations that need to be exposed and addressed, rather than camouflaged and ignored, since they tap directly into the original set of problems that initiated the restoration of the river delta. The Ochre Garden is thus both a theatre exposing natural forces and human influences, and a water cleaning facility.

Instead of deconstructing the embanked northern canal, Nielsen decided to take advantage of its unique spatial qualities in an attempt to strengthen and emphasise its position as a threshold between two different parts of the river delta that represent two very different perceptions of nature. On this view, the interior space of the embankment becomes a kind of in-between space, which neither belongs to the newly engineered nature of the restored river delta nor to the old cultivated nature of the reclaimed river delta, but holds the capacity to re-present them both. Nielsen unfolds this potential by creating a series of water ponds somewhat hidden between the embankments of the canal, which acts as a biological cleaning facility, removing the poisonous ochre compounds from the drainage water before it enters the restored river. By working with a geometry with references to the baroque garden, Nielsen not only evokes the idea of the garden as a third nature, but also introduces a level of control, which acts as a mirror for the surrounding landscape, questioning which part of the delta – the reclaimed or the restored – exemplifies the highest degree of human control.

The intersecting axes play a central role in the design as lines guiding both the physical movement and the visual experience. Cutting straight through both embankments enhances the experience of the threshold situation, and creates the opportunity to look through one type of nature into another. Pathways above, on, and below the waterline allow people to follow the water and to experience its transformation through the cleaning process.

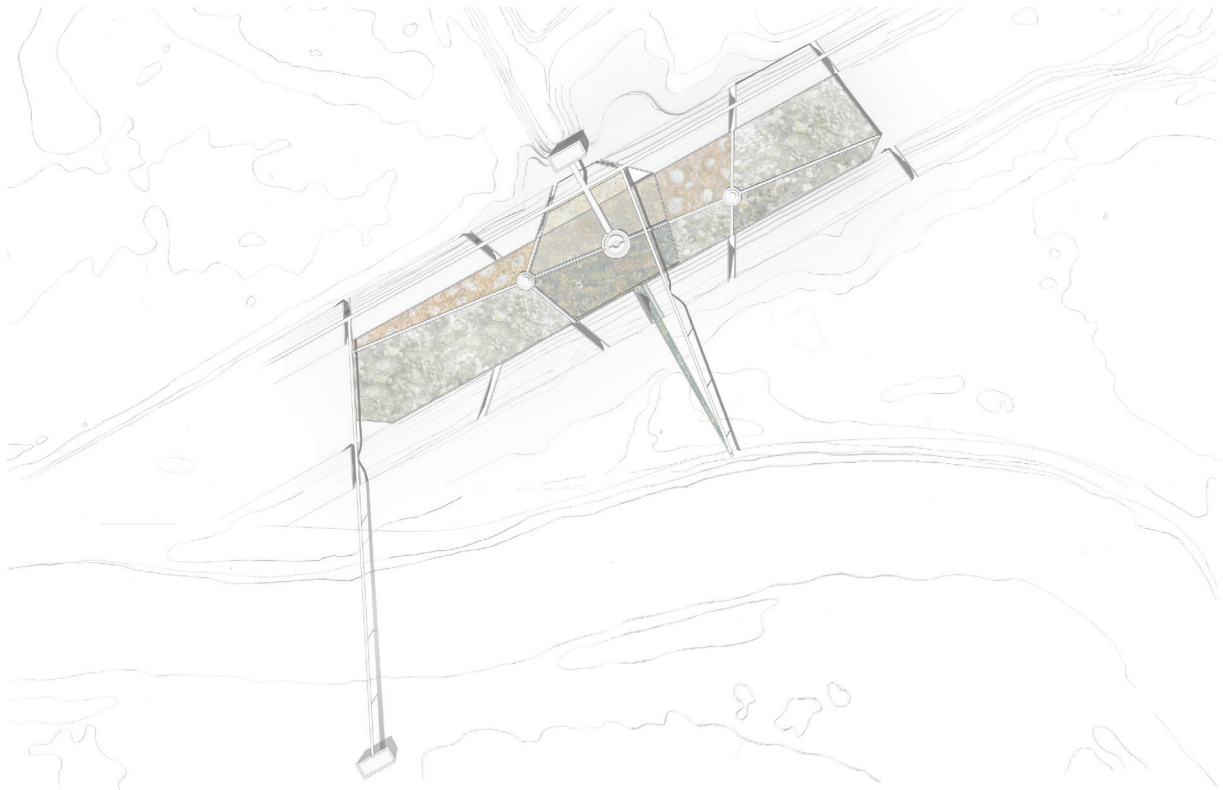


Figure 7

The Ochre Garden. Student project by Anne Monrad Nielsen, 2014.

The Ochre Garden is situated between the embankments of the former northern canal. This particular site constitutes an interesting threshold between two very different parts of the river delta – one that is restored, and one that remains in its reclaimed condition. The main feature of the garden is a series of large ponds through which ochre polluted drainage water from the remaining part of the reclaimed river delta is cleaned before it enters the new meandering river in the restored part of the river delta.

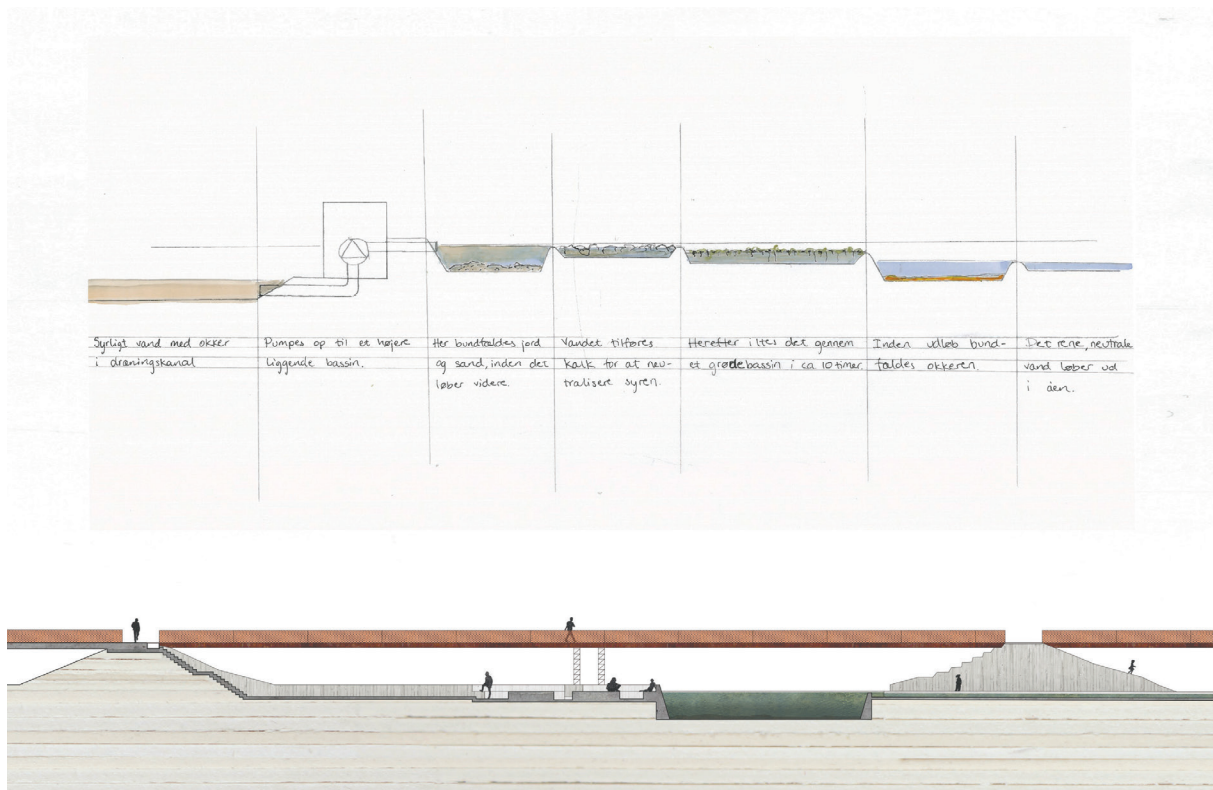


Figure 8

Theatre and water treatment facility. Student project by Anne Monrad Nielsen, 2014.

From the top of the embankments where one gets an overview of the vast landscape, one can move down into the former canal to get an insight into some of the biological processes influencing life in the delta. The design of the ponds and pathways enables visitors to get close to the elements enhancing the aesthetic experience of the spatial qualities. The diagram above the section explains the different stages in the biological cleaning process. This process involves adding limestone to lower the acidity of the water, and using White Water Crowfoot (*Ranunculus Aquatilis*) to oxidise and filtrate it.



Figure 9
Between the lines. Student project by Anne Monrad Nielsen, 2014.
The intersecting axes play a central role in the Ochre Garden as lines guiding both the physical movement and the visual experience. Cutting straight through both embankments enhances the experience of the threshold situation and creates the opportunity to look through one “nature” into another.

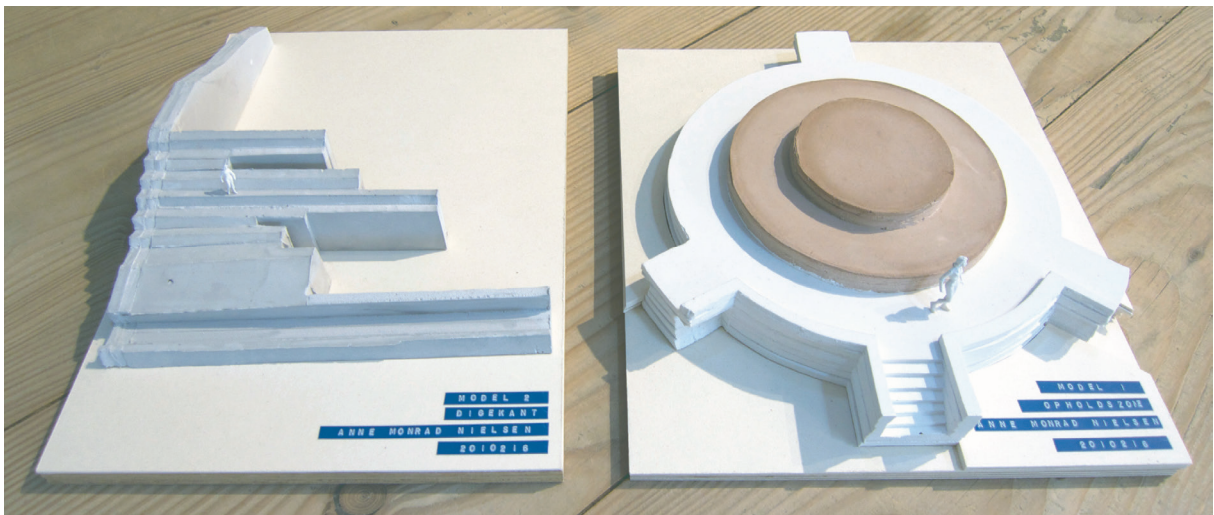


Figure 10
Material conditions. Student project by Anne Monrad Nielsen, 2014.
The Ochre Garden detail model to the left describes a proposal for a concrete element that secures a precise cut through the porous material of the embankment and accentuates the embankment as a built element in the landscape. The Ochre Garden detail model to the right describes one of the platforms that allow people to switch between paths on and below the waterline enhancing the different aesthetic experience of the cleaning ponds inside the garden. To reveal and enrich the aesthetic qualities of ochre, Nielsen proposes to use ochre-dyed concrete for the central part of the platform.

Conclusion

Whether landscape architectural interventions such as Nielsen's Ochre Garden could make a difference to the local people of Skjern and their feelings toward the restoration of the river delta obviously remains an open question. However, projects that strive to respect the different, and sometimes conflicting, cultural layers of the landscape might contribute to a more inclusive approach to the management of dissonance in nature restoration. In celebrating both the new nature restoration and the old land reclamation as two equally important transformation processes in the history of the Skjern River Delta, the usual opposition between culture and nature seems temporally deactivated, allowing people to experience the complex delta environment in a non-judgemental manner. In this way, the Ochre Garden appears to achieve a kind of openness that potentially embraces different perceptions of nature, and makes it possible for diverse groups of people to identify themselves with the same landscape. This multi-layered approach to the transformation of landscapes could thus prove valuable when it comes to fulfilling some of the ambitions formulated in the ELC.

Furthermore, projects like the Ochre Garden, which do not subscribe to the idea of wilderness in attempting to restore nature, might also help us on a path to a more responsible environmentalism. As has been pointed out by William Cronon, the notion of "wilderness" as a perception of nature can be quite problematic, because it ultimately places humans outside nature. This way we leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honourable human place in nature might look like. Furthermore, idealising a distant wilderness too often means *not* idealising the environment in which we live, and where most of our serious environmental problems originate (see Cronon, 1995; Olwig, 1984). Although nature in the restored Skjern River Delta is far from being wild, the idea of wilderness seems to have influenced and guided the project, given the amount of resources that have been used to create an image of a wild river delta (one without any straight lines).

Maybe some of these resources could have been better spent on cleaning the ochre polluted drainage water, which continues to be pumped into the new meandering river? Again, the openness that seems to follow a multi-layered approach to the transformation of landscapes could prove valuable in stimulating reflection on our complex relationship with the natural world and its processes – not only as an intellectual exercise, but also as something that becomes accessible aesthetically through bodily experience.

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