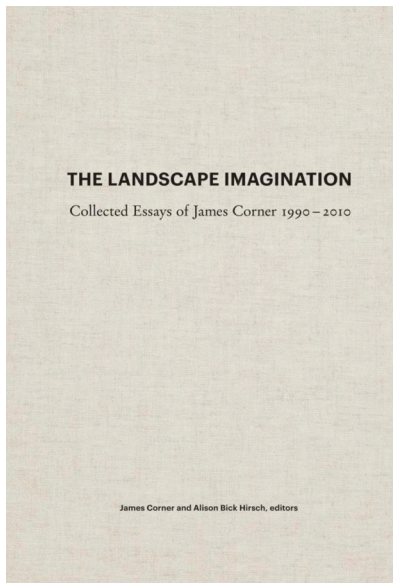


The Landscape Imagination

Collected Essays of James Corner 1990 - 2010

Editors: James Corner, Alison Bick Hirsch

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To plot, to map, to dig and to set. The four verbs reveal the design methodology of James Corner. This book is a collection of 16 essays written by the “urban dreamscaper” from 1990 to 2010 in a 367-page volume, divided into four chapters. Corner uses his acute senses as a designer and his abundant knowledge as a theorist to dig deep into landscape architecture.

Originally published separately in twenty years, the 16 essays are not organized chronologically but in an order from intricate philosophies to substantial practices. The book starts with the chapter “Theory” with four essays on the history of landscape theories and Corner’s critique on contemporary theories. A variety of references in the field of art history, sociology, philosophy and architecture is used to enrich the essays. The next chapter “Representation and Creativity” displays Corner’s distinctive insight into the landscape analytical and visualization methods such as aerial photos, drawing and mapping. The essays are less about the tools themselves but more about deploying them for critical design process. The following chapter is named “Landscape Urbanism”, introducing a complex theory of understanding cities as ecological metabolism that functions like a “landscape”. Corner is an advocator of landscape urbanism and delivers a concise introduction. The last chapter “Practice” drags the readers back to the real world, where Corner reveals his design thinking behind his famous projects such as the High Line and Fresh Kills Park.

The most striking feature of the book is the language itself. The British author discusses landscape in a proud and poetic tone. The elaborately picked words, the vivid metaphors and the rhythm of language guarantees an enjoyable read in the first place. Besides, Corner’s design attitude appears consistent. As a reaction to the either too scientific or too arbitrary design trends in the 1990s, his position is more or less in the middle. Compared to the pure pragmatists such as Ian McHarg, Corner adds his poetic imagination, as the book title implies. This small but mighty factor runs through all of his writings. Compared to the post-modern “land artists” who put a grid of bagels in a garden, his words steer us back to landscape itself. However, though the theories in the book are argued coherently and flawlessly inside their own ideological framework, the book becomes a bit like an alluring utopia when compared to landscape practices in the real world. In fact, many of his projects presented in the book lack the self-explanatory spatial quality and the overwhelming glamour of his written expression. Possibly, there might be an exaggeration on the capability, responsibility and influence of landscape architects in the book.

In spite of the mentioned limits, this book is a must-read for everybody interested in this landscape “starchitect”. It is by no means an instructive textbook, but a beautifully-written manifesto of one of the most successful contemporary landscape architects.