



## WALKING THE AIRE

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Talking about a subject can only take you so far. We like to keep on the move; heading off on excursions to seek out powerful and vital landscape architecture locations both in our immediate environment as well as in other countries and cultures. The destinations for our journeys always feature landscape designs of the present and the past.

In June 2019, we received an invitation from Ljubljana to visit Geneva, Switzerland to receive the prestigious international LILA Award for Rooted in Clay, a humble garden built on a fluvial terrace at the Red River in Winnipeg. We were full of joy and enthusiasm to be given the opportunity to embark on this journey, but there was more!

The award ceremony was hosted by jury member George Descombes and was a part of an annual festival called *Quinzaine de l'urbanisme* that is well known and attended in Geneva. Georges Descombes, born in the suburbs of Geneva, is a renowned Swiss architect. His unconventional approach to designing landscapes has made waves

worldwide. In 2018, George's longstanding work on the renaturation of the Aire River near Geneva was awarded the LILA Landezine International Landscape Award. As some readers may recall, George presented his poetic ideas at the 2019 Atmosphere Symposium in Winnipeg.

We arrived two days before the LILA event and could hardly wait to walk the Aire River. Our journey began in the morning with the late summer sun shining brightly as we passed lush and well-maintained gardens. For many decades, the valleys around us had been drained, farmed, and developed. The town gave us the impression of being friendly and safe. The old farm that had evolved into a community-based petting zoo and a row of tall-grown poplar trees gave us the first hint that something special lay before us.

It is always our intention to experience the things we have learned about through publications and presentations on foot and in person. Rather than simply looking at images and reading texts, we acquire a deeper understanding of the space by walking through it. It is important for both of us to foster creative thinking through this process of movement and rest. It sometimes even radically changes our relationship to a project. By looking and walking we find a means to hone our sensation of the space while committing it to memory with greater precision. We are thus able to develop an aesthetic sensibility and the capacity to make judgments that guide us in our design processes.

Wandering along bridges, pavilions, pergolas, and dikes, we were finally able to see and experience the 'fresh' Aire converted into uneven parallels: an erodible river corridor and a river garden which had formerly existed as a canal. In physical terms, we had hardly travelled any distance at all but were crossing acres of mental territory. Among the tall and spacious Lombardi poplars (*Populus nigra 'Italica'*) we noticed a cloud of dust in our peripheral vision and were surprised to find a horse barreling towards us at full speed. We jumped aside just in the nick of time. Thinking back on this event, a coincidence becomes apparent, relating to a story George shared with the audience in the Centre Space of the John A. Russell Building at the University of Manitoba in February 2019.

The story refers to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Geneva's other famous son, who stayed in the nearby village of Confignon where a priest provided him with a meal. Rousseau, the Genevan philosopher of the 16th century and author of 'Julie, or the New Heloise', in turn, helped two young women and their horses to cross the river. The women thanked Rousseau with a picnic, and they picked cherries together.

In Geneva, seeing a grove of cherry trees, some left-over stones from an old bridge, a long table, and a fontaine (a one-piece blend of a fountain providing potable water, a bench, and a table) reminded us of Rousseau and his writings. This view functioned as a tranquil way of creating a dialogue between the past and present and to introduce history and stories without signage or explanation. We would have loved to pick some cherries, but cherries are not in season in September. We reminded ourselves that it was good to have a reason to return to Geneva because we never experience the same landscape twice.

We cheerfully continued our walk and followed the shortcut locals take to get to the hidden part of the project; an alternate, meandering waterway alongside the canal gardens. We were intrigued to explore the iconic diamond-shaped grid of the river's new bed, but as predicted, the topography of the erodible corridor had been nearly wiped out by the formative energy of the diverted water and thus reached its intended target: constructed, finally, to disappear.

The Aire River is a vital rural public space, borrowing scenery from the Alps which lie in the background, and the vistas into fertile farmland which lie in the middle ground. By walking



Top to bottom:  
1. Crossing acres of mental territory.  
2. Access to uneven parallels.

Opposite page:  
A vital rural public space.

All images by  
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through these spaces, we found ourselves able to comprehend George Descombes: "The canal became the pointer for the transformations, a reference line providing the possibility of understanding a before and an after, a becoming which superimposes both situations and accepts that something began which was already there".

There are many things we learn while walking in a landscape: the formal rules of construction, the ability to read a landscape, the sense to give form to something, and the knowledge of how places are received and occupied. All of these things can be practiced to a point where they become a rich fund for a designer's own imagination. By studying the doubled waterways of the Aire River, we learnt a great deal about space, materials, plants, proportions, perspective, ecology, hydrology, engineering, and composition. By visiting this place, we also found something to admire in landscape design; that it all comes down to understanding time, change, and transience. The sightings of horses and butterflies, cyclists and joggers, families and daydreamers comforted us and reminded us to accept and embrace the river as the co-designer of this project, and to progress at our own pace.