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Jan Stadelmann (right) and Daia Stutz have an urbanistic understanding of landscape - no wonder they studied both landscape architecture as well as city planning.

## The new Aesthetes

Jan Stadelmann and Daia Stutz are part of a new generation of landscape architects. Both think in cycles of effects rather than final outcomes. They are calling for a departure from rigid designs and movement toward a new aesthetics in which the landscape is free to evolve as part of the process and need not conform to any fixed ideal. Because questioning old ways of thinking and starting fresh is worth it.

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THERESA RAMISCH

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Zurich, somewhere in a former industrial area that has evolved into a mixed-used residential area over time. Previously on the outskirts, now a central part of this trendy Swiss metropolis. This is where S2L has its offices. In a four-story building from the 1950's, landscape architects Jan Stadelmann and Daia Stutz share an open-design studio along with their four employees and three additional architect offices. S2L is used to that type of interdisciplinary environment from their studies. After earning their bachelor degrees in landscape architecture together in the Swiss town of Rapperswil, they both went abroad for multifaced master's programmes and that experience shapes them to this day. Stutz went to the USA and studied at the Harvard University Graduate School of Urban Design and Stadelmann went to Germany where he earned a master's in urban design at the TU Munich. They both returned to Switzerland in 2015/16 and founded their own shared firm in their early 30's following a competition they won in Geneva. The team has since grown by four heads, has won three additional competitions that resulted in smaller and larger projects which are now beginning the initial phases of realisation.

### A new generation

Jan Stadelmann and Daia Stutz are not landscape architects in the classic sense but rather stand for a new way of understanding and working with the landscape. Their objective is to pose critical questions and to break with entrenched ways of doing things, to view the landscape in terms of forces and processes. "As landscape architects and urban planners, we have an urban appreciation of landscape," observes Daia Stutz in discussion. They are fascinated with the landscape as a whole – whether green or grey, S2L sees no difference. "We don't discuss details for hours, what material should be used for borders and what colour the gravel should be.

We much prefer to talk about moods, atmospheres and consider the big picture," adds Jan Stadelmann. S2L view the landscape as a complex system that is both constantly changing and subject to the influence of a variety of factors such as the process of expansion or retraction, political developments, material flows or cultural realities. Their objective is not only to create a good design but rather to understand the underlying system as well.

### Understanding the system

With their way of thinking and approach to doing things, S2L have garnered attention in the landscape architecture and planning scene. And that is reflected in the way they work. As a result, Stadelmann and Stutz rarely apply conventional methods when preparing an analysis of the status quo. On the contrary, their competition designs are based on holistic, sometimes abstract analyses with outcome models and cycles that expand the scope of the design competition. Next, S2L combines analysis and insight with specific spatial conditions. The office creates large-scale models as part of the process. This helps them to define proportions and spatial qualities, according to Stadelmann and Stutz. The results of their preliminary work comprise intelligently conceived competition entries within the scope of which S2L attempt to find appropriate solutions for the location and its future users. In order to highlight the nature of their process, the young Swiss natives also present their ideas in uncommon formats to the extent permitted by the sponsor. To date, a competition at the Zurich airport afforded them their greatest freedom. In lieu of a standard design, the office presented its ideas in the form of an animation. And for a competition in the Swiss hamlet of Frauenfeld, the office joined forces with graphic designers. They drew a comic that presented the development process for barracks located in the city centre from a variety of perspectives. "The simplest way for us to





communicate our ideas to a client is by entering into a dialogue. Fixed formats such as visualisations create specific expectations whereas words leave space for the listener's creativity", explains Stadelmann. "This is one reason we attempt to break out of conventional presentation methods. We want to highlight the importance of open, process-based development by using new formats that present the landscape as a system", adds Stutz.

#### The aesthetics of the moment

The youthful Swiss are ahead of the times. Currently, there are no formal planning instruments and formats that permit a process-based, systematic approach. At competitions, the sponsors consistently demand final products – in the form of a design, visualisation or a model. Even plans with a long time horizon, such as master plans, that are characterised by a series of steps are presented by their designers in a fixed state. The trend towards a process-based approach is perceptible (more and more clients want to see a presentation of the development process), however the designs rarely are truly ready to react the "landscape as system".

Jan Stadelmann and Daia Stutz still struggle with the fixed specifications of urban design competitions and study assignments. As they relate, the first step in the right direction is to open oneself to a new image of landscape. "We believe that we have to let go of fixed conditions in order to be able to work this way. However, that's not easy even for us. As planners we're used to having a picture of the landscape in our head and transferring this picture to a design," says Daia Stutz describing his own thought process. To this, Jan Stadelmann adds: "Nevertheless, we believe that it's necessary to open oneself to a new aesthetic sense, a new means of perceiving the landscape in order to be able to work with a landscape that is becoming ever more fast-paced. We call it the aesthetics of the moment, of the temporary".

Already in their studies, S2L tested the systematic approach.  
Top: Stadelmann examined the potential for integrated landscape planning the Northern Chur Rhine valley. Bottom: Stutz investigated the impact of large infrastructure projects on the landscape using the example of the Gotthard base tunnel.

#### The big picture

Stadelmann and Stutz first tested how that might work in their master's thesis. Whilst Stadelmann examined the potential for integrated landscape planning in the Northern Chur Rhine valley, Stutz analyzed the effects of large-scale infrastructure projects on the landscape based on the new cross-Alpine route opened by the Gotthard Basis Tunnel. Both of these theses clearly showed that the development of fragmented landscapes today is often perceived by the public and planner experts as random. However, a more refined look reveals that the individual processes – agriculture, residential development, water course modifications, infrastructure consisting of protective structures and the extraction of natural resources – not only have their own internal logic but also influence each other. When working on their master's theses, the planners were able to do what interested them, to go beyond all statutory and planning instruments. Now it's time to earn a living. How do they do that? "Of course we still submit fixed conditions at competitions, such as designs and visualisations. But at the same time we still have our ambition of pursuing our idea of integrated planning, to simply do, to try new things and we still have the hope that we can have an impact," says Stutz in response. It's not without reason that the office established a small research centre in order to develop new ideas for a process-related approach. However, S2L does not want to wait until planning instruments change by themselves. They are actively trying to advance their approach – as part of competition entries using presentation formats or own publications. "Swiss landscape architecture has achieved a great deal over the past decades and is highly respected internationally. As a young team, we don't want to simply rest on that, we want to go further, to search for new paths. And of course you can fall on your face, but that doesn't matter. We're trying anyway. That is our approach."



