

APPLICATIONS OF PHOTOMONTAGE IN CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

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1 **ABSTRACT**

Landscape architects have employed montage as a representation tool since the 18th century. More recently, a specific type of montage, the photomontage, or composite drawing created by combining photographic elements with other types of representation such as pen or watercolor, have become prevalent in contemporary landscape architecture representation. Digital tools such as Photoshop have contributed to the proliferation of photomontage as a technique for describing designs. Paralleling the use of digital tools to assemble photomontages is a shift from highly abstract, conceptual photomontage compositions to more literal representations (Composite Landscapes Exhibit, 2014). Despite the departure from abstraction in contemporary photomontages, there are examples of photomontages created throughout the design process that go beyond the literal picture (Belanger and Urton, 2014). From an analysis of contemporary literature and works produced by several firms, including James Corner Field Operations, Atelier Girot, and GROSS MAX landscape architects, four categories of photomontage emerge: (1) photomontage as an exploratory sketch, (2) photomontage as a tool to communicate a conceptual idea, (3) photomontage as a tool to combine scientific data and emotional quality and lastly, (4) photomontage as a tool to literally represent a place. Using these four categories, this paper draws upon contemporary examples to analyze the compositional strategies of photomontages in each category. Findings reveal that unique compositional features characterize each category. Photomontages as sketches apply transparency, varying scales and saturation, and are highly conceptual in nature. Photomontages that communicate conceptual ideas have similarly abstract qualities, juxtapose disparate images at different scales, and abandon the traditional rectangular frame. Photomontages that combine three-dimensional modeling tools with emotional qualities include quantitative data with transparent photographic overlays and are incorporated as analytical tools in the design process. Literal representations are contained within rectangular frames, have high, consistent saturation, and show elements and figures at realistic proportions. Analyzing the various types of photomontages and their compositions shows how photomontage can expand beyond a literal representation tool that characterizes many contemporary composite renderings.

1.1 **Keywords**

Photomontage, Representation, Visual Communication, Contemporary Landscape Architecture

2 INTRODUCTION

Landscape architects and designers have employed montage, a technique that combines different pictures to create one image, as a representation tool since the 18th century. Also referred to as composite drawings, montages were used by early landscape designers such as Humphrey Repton to communicate designs to clients by combining maps, text, sketches, and other visual media into single compositions (Daniels from Waldheim and Hansen, 2014). More recently, digitally-produced photomontages, which rely predominantly on combining photographic elements, have become a particularly popular form of representation in contemporary landscape architecture (Daniels from Waldheim and Hansen, 2014). This theme is highlighted in a recent exhibit, *Composite Landscapes (2014)*, which features a selection of contemporary landscape architectural photomontages. An analysis of contemporary photomontages from the *Composite Landscapes* exhibit, literature, and landscape architecture practice is used to define four categories of photomontages with unique compositional strategies.

2.1 Contemporary Literature on Photomontage

Since the mid- to late-1990s, photomontages have experienced a shift from highly abstract, conceptual composites to literal representations, paralleling the emergence of digital tools such as Photoshop. This has sparked critical discussion, with recent literature advocating for the application of photomontage as an idea-making rather than picturing tool. In her essay *Structuring Relations: From Montage to Model in Composite Imaging*, author Karen M'Closkey critiques how recent photomontages depict design in this way. She writes, "In this sense it is the procedural and conceptual functions of montage and collage—to re-present, not imitate—that are significant and that have been largely neglected in the shift to digital montage" (M'Closkey from Waldheim and Hansen, 2014). Sanda Iliescu is also critical of contemporary digital, realistic photomontage; in *Beyond Cut-and-Paste: The Promise of Collage in Contemporary Design* she writes: "Rather than metaphor, what we get from this kind of work is cliché. What we lose is collage's power to summon feelings that span the fertile territory between art and life" (Iliescu, 2008).

Despite the trend toward literal representation in photomontages, there are examples that exhibit a variety of compositional strategies that expand beyond realism. In their article *Situating Eidetic Photomontage in Contemporary Landscape Architecture*, Blake Belanger and Ellen Urton write "...many different photomontage techniques that include combining 3D models with photographic elements, image collage, and mixed media compositions. Other offices balance photomontage with more traditional media, such as watercolor painting and colored pencil renderings. Landscape architects commonly employ photomontages to create perspective drawings representing a proposed design scene. In addition, designers also use photomontage in their creative process to investigate conceptual ideas and explore design potential" (Belanger and Urton, 2014).

3 METHODS

The compositional elements described by Belanger and Urton in *Situating Eidetic Photomontage in Contemporary Landscape Architecture* serves as the framework for the visual analysis of photomontages in each category. The questions they pose in their analysis are, "what characterizes the image, what are the compositional attributes and which of those characteristics occur with frequency, how was each image constructed, to what degree is the work representational or abstract, and to what degree is the idea conveyed literal or conceptual?" To address these questions, the authors define eight "visual cues" used for analyzing photomontages (Belanger and Urton, 2014). This analysis applies the compositional "visual cues" described by Belanger and Urton including frame ambiguity, scale distortion, and degree of abstraction. Transparency and saturation are additionally used to assess the photomontages, as variation was noted between types of photomontage.

4 FINDINGS

This paper builds defines four distinct categories of contemporary photomontage: (1) photomontage as an exploratory sketch, (2) photomontage as a tool to communicate a conceptual idea, (3) photomontage as a tool to combine scientific data and emotional quality and lastly, (4) photomontage as a

tool to literally represent a place. Using these four categories, this paper draws upon contemporary examples to analyze the compositional strategies of photomontages in each category.

4.1 Photomontage as an Exploratory Sketch

A contemporary landscape architecture firm, GROSS MAX landscape architects, based in Edinburgh, Scotland, utilizes photomontage as an exploratory sketch by integrating the representation tool into the design process. Belanger and Urton make note of this when they quote Eelco Hooffman, a founding partner of the studio: "While for many architects, the plan and diagram remain the starting point of their designs, for us, the image, or more precisely the mental picture of the image, is the point of departure into further exploration" (Belanger and Urton, 2014).

The photomontages produced by GROSS MAX are characterized by a highly conceptual, unfinished quality, like a sketch, though they are constructed digitally from photographs. The representations present ideas rather than literal pictures, amplified by using high transparency and varying, distorted scales. The composite drawings for Parklandschaft Tempelhof, a 2017 competition entry for a park on an abandoned airport site in Berlin, exhibit this unfinished, abstract quality. One composite drawing for a section of the park titled the Field features a wide runway that disappears into the horizon, bounded by tall grasses and flowers. Transparent overlays, including some bands of abstract color and barely discernable figures, are collaged at different scales, contributing to the abstract, conceptual nature of the composite. In the expansive sky, a very large blimp hovers in the upper right of the image; the exaggerated size of the blimp draws attention to the sky, emphasizing the importance of maintaining the expansive view in the design. While composed of photographs, all representations for the Parklandschaft Tempelhof competition use high transparency, exaggerated, unrealistic scales to emphasize certain qualities of the place, and varying saturation levels (GROSS MAX landscape architects, 2017). These characteristics create an unfinished, abstract photomontage that represent ideas rather than literal pictures, akin to a preliminary sketch in the conceptual design phase.

4.2 Photomontage as Eidetic, or a Way to Communicate Conceptual Ideas

James Corner, a contemporary landscape architect and founder of the practice Field Operations, has explored the topic of photomontage in publications and practice. In his essay *Eidetic Operations and New Landscapes*, Corner advocates for the use of what he terms eidetic images in landscape representation, and similar to Karen M'Closkey, holds a critical viewpoint of composites that literally picture a place rather than illustrate an idea. James Corner defines the term eidetic when he writes, "Eidetic...that which pertains to the visual formation of ideas, or to the reciprocity between image and idea. That drawing is fundamentally about making images suggests that it might actually generate and transform ideas for the percipient rather than simply representing them" (Corner from Waldheim and Hansen, 2014). To create eidetic representations, Corner employs photomontage as one of his primary tools. He describes this when he writes that photomontage is "...essentially an affiliative and productive technique, aimed not toward limitation and control but toward emancipation, heterogeneity, and open-ended relations among parts" (Waldheim and Hansen, 2014). Corner advocates for the use of the photomontage to communicate an idea of a place, rather than to simply portray it literally.

In the book *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape*, Corner collaborates with photographer Alex Maclean to create composites from photographs and cartographic images that encompass the notion of eidetic representation (Corner, 1996). The photomontage titled *Pedagogical Drift*, featured in the *Composite Landscapes* exhibit, is an example of eidetic work (Waldheim and Hansen, 2014). In this photomontage, there is a bird's eye photograph of agriculture parcels in the bottom right of the composition. Collaged in the background are light contours with a square grid overlaid on a black background. Another layer, abstract forms extracted from a map that perhaps represent a feature of the landscape, such as soil type, is positioned diagonally across the montage, extending beyond the black square in the background. Overall, the composite is very abstract, and suggests a central idea: it emphasizes cultural applications of the American landscape through the use of images that represent how people take measures of land through data such as contours.

James Corner's eidetic composite *Lake / City / Horizon, Toolonlahti Park*, also featured in *Composite Landscapes*, has parallel compositional qualities to those found in the composites in *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape* (Waldheim and Hansen, 2014). Juxtaposing distinct

photographs, the photomontage abandons a rectangular frame. Images of ground texture, trees, and a human figure are at different scales and saturations. The exaggerated scale of the ground texture highlights a quality that would otherwise be difficult to discern in a literal portrayal from one's perspective. Like his previous composites and the photomontages composed by GROSS MAX landscape architects, the eidetic representations by James Corner are more abstract than literal and focus on evoking qualities and conceptual ideas about place.

4.3 Photomontage as a Combination of Data and Emotional Qualities

Contemporary landscape architects employ photomontage as a representational technique that combines scientific data with the emotional qualities of a place. Scientific data can include spatial analytical data tools, such as geographic information system (GIS) and three-dimensional modeling software. Karen M'Closkey highlights how data is incorporated into composites when she writes, "...while often used in conventional ways - that is, to make topographic surfaces - three-dimensional models have immense potential to facilitate new forms of composite imaging..." (M'Closkey from Waldheim and Hansen, 2014). One practitioner, Christophe Girot, currently the chair at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and founder of the practice Atelier Girot Landscape Architecture, explores this concept described by M'Closkey in his representations. He explains his motivation behind combining data with composite images when he writes, "There exists a schism between the way landscape is understood scientifically, either as a functional normative network or an ecological system, and the way the same place exists cognitively, poetically, and emotionally for people" (Girot and Imhof, 2016).

To express the emotional quality of a place with data, or the "way landscape is understood scientifically," Girot creates composites by combining highly accurate three-dimensional digital models with collaged photographic elements, sometimes annotated with data describing the site. One example, *Section through true-color point-cloud* exhibited at *Composite Landscapes*, shows a section perspective created by overlaying semi-transparent photographs of buildings, trees, and vegetation textures on a three-dimensional topographical model. The section cut line is annotated with latitude, longitude, and elevational data (Waldheim and Hansen, 2014). The transparent photographic overlays of elements and materiality provide the viewer with a sense of how it feels to be on the site, while the data provide a quantitative resolution.

Another example produced by Atelier Girot is a composite for a project in Quartu Sant'Elena in Cagliari, Italy. Like *Section through true-color point-cloud*, the drawing is composed of a three-dimensional model combined with photographic and satellite imagery. The firm's project description explains how the image was composed, as well as the motivation behind its creation: "Combined with photographs and satellite imagery, the GIS geo-referencing and 3D visualization allow us to identify, at the micro level, landscape, circulation, water runoff, zoning strategies and areas needing resolution" (Atelier Girot, 2017). In this sense, it is interesting to note that the photomontage is not only employed as a tool for communicating the spatial and emotional qualities of the site, but also as a part of the design's analytical process.

4.4 Photomontage as Literal Representation

Lastly, photomontages are frequently used as tools to literally picture a place; this method has become a popular communication tool for landscape architects, particularly when presenting a design to clients or stakeholders. Though critical of photomontages as realistic portrayals, Karen M'Closkey remarks on the benefits of the accessibility and clarity of this type of photomontage when she writes, "Whereas the photorealistic montage view may not be productive as a design tool, it functions exceedingly well as a means of communication..." (M'Closkey from Waldheim and Hansen, 2014). Recent composites created by James Corner Field Operations serve as an example of the type of realistic photomontage described by M'Closkey. The photomontages created for a design for a park, Presidio Parklands in San Francisco, exhibit realism. The textures, figure, elevated structure, and vegetation are at the same scale. Elements in the composite are opaque, and the overall compositions employ convincing one-point perspectives (Corner, 2017). These qualities, along with rectangular frames, suggest that the photomontage attempts to imitate an actual photographic image to literally represent a place.

5 CONCLUSION

Photomontage is a popular representation tool used by contemporary landscape architects throughout the design process. While recent trends in composite images are literal in nature, their application in contemporary landscape architecture reveals three additional types of photomontage: an exploratory sketch, a way to communicate a conceptual idea, and a way to combine emotional qualities and data. An analysis of examples from the *Composite Landscapes* exhibit and work by practicing landscape architects reveals unique compositional features in each category. The photomontages as a sketch exhibit high transparency, varying scales and saturations, and are highly conceptual in nature. Representations that emphasize an idea hold similarly abstract qualities, juxtaposing disparate images at different scales and abandoning the constraints of a rectangular frame. Composites constructed with three-dimensional modeling tools include quantitative data and photographs, and are even incorporated as an analytical tool in the design process. Photomontages attempting to literally represent a place adhere to a rectangular frame, and attempt to imitate a photographic image. Understanding the various types of photomontage compositions may allow the representational tool to be used more broadly in contemporary landscape architecture practice; further study or development may involve interviews with artists of the photomontages cited in this paper in order to explore in depth the intentions behind their composites, and how they apply this representational tool in their design process.

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