

REVIEWS

Kathryn Gustafson: Sculpting the Land

By Leah Levy
Spacemaker Press, Washington, D.C. 1998
64 pp., color and b/w illustrations, \$24.95

By **Christophe Girot**



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Shell headquarters at Rueil Malmaison

At last, here is the long-awaited book on the French works of Kathryn Gustafson. Her professional experience and creative ability singles her out as one of the most successful women landscape architects in the somewhat difficult French professional market. The reason for this success lies in the fact that she has always advocated a strong artistic stand throughout her work. Gustafson distinguishes herself particularly in France as the practitioner that has forged a strong and identifiable landscape style in the French corporate world over the past decade. Her work blends sensual land forms with strong planting schemes which result in an intricate and interwoven project. Kathryn Gustafson: Sculpting the Land offers a brief summary of her career in the first section entitled Portfolio, and then concentrates essentially on two of her major projects, which are the Shell headquarters at Rueil Malmaison and the Rights of Man Square in the new town of Evry.

The Shell project, completed in 1991, is probably the strongest and most imageable of Gustafson's French works. It is a work of great sensuality that manages to take advantage of the extraordinary technical difficulties and constraints of the site. The project is essentially a vast roof garden since most of the terrain is covered either by buildings or underground parking. The entrance is orchestrated in a fine set of sequences that enhance subtle changes in grade and the skillful play of plant textures. The book is well-illustrated and replete with interesting technical drawings showing some

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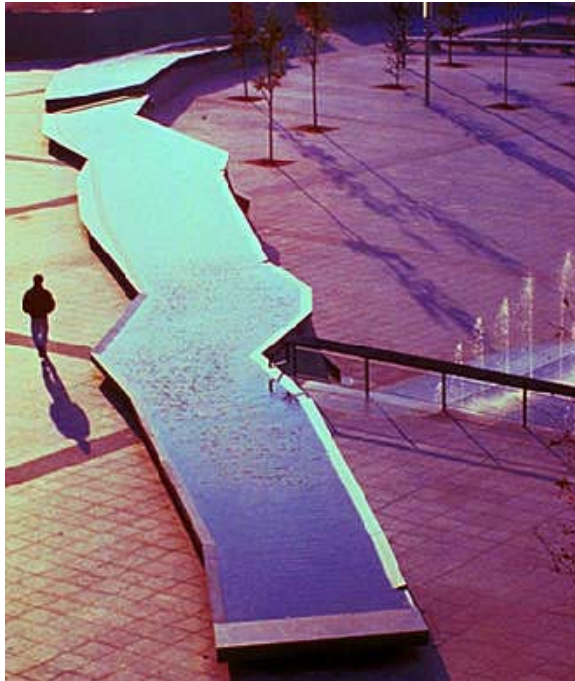
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construction details.

The Rights of Man Square in Evry is a project diametrically opposed to the Shell project, both in its philosophy and usage. It is, therefore, interesting to see them together in this book. The square is a beautifully detailed mineral plaza with a variety of terraced levels. It is located at the heart of the new town center of Evry. The space plays a pivotal role between the town hall and the new cathedral. The dragon basin, which is the main artistic feature of the square, is a wonderfully cubistic and outstretched metallic water ribbon that contrasts in a playful and dislocated manner with the staunch symmetry of the Mario Botta Cathedral. When visiting the place, I remember seeing a cortege of nuns peacefully crossing the square amidst swarming teenage skateboarders, without any apparent disturbance. This mix of peace and play reflects all the sensitivity and skill that has been put into this project. It is almost as if the space had been conceived to accommodate, simultaneously, many modes of existence.

The text, written by Leah Levy, could have drawn more substance from the comparison between the two projects mentioned above. First of all, the difference between a public space located in the difficult district of Evry and a corporate space located in the exclusive suburb of Rueil, needs to be explicitly stated to understand the change in plan, materials and detailing. Secondly it should have been mentioned that the Rights of Man Square, despite its exceptional artistry, is in line with French mainstream landscape practice of the past decade that has essentially concentrated on the design of public open space, whereas the Shell headquarters project, on the other hand, is exceptional in all respects, since the idea of corporate landscape design à la française is a genre that had not been truly recognized until now. Corporate design is also a domain in which Gustafson has been clearly a leader and has acquired national recognition. It is, therefore, no surprise that she has worked on several other large-scale corporate projects such as the L'Oreal headquarters in Aulnay-sous-Bois and the Esso/Exxon headquarters also located in Rueil Malmaison. The book should have taken more advantage of the novelty of her work in this domain. We are unfortunately left with very little information on all these other projects.



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Rights of Man Square, Evry.

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There has been a decision to show several color pages of details of the Shell and Rights of Man projects, but the consequence is that there is, unfortunately, little room left to illustrate the personal creative process of Gustafson at work. Why are all the exquisite sketches and working models that are the key to her design secrets shown, at best, as small and rather insignificant vignettes? It is also particularly sad that the correlation between the text on Gustafson's work process and her drawings is not made more explicit in the book; particularly when one knows about her background in fabric design at the F.I.T. in New York and her subsequent studies at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure du Paysage at Versailles. This would probably have required a more personal and integrated approach to Gustafson's artistic practice, which was probably not the goal of this book.

It is interesting to note that most of Gustafson's French works deal with some strong artistic statement. Her designs can be interpreted as surgical acts of healing, where the land is skillfully draped and sown as if to hide past torments. This particular attitude clearly makes Gustafson's work unique in France. The landscape as art movement never really reached this country, and most professionals would never think of themselves as artists, but simply as pragmatic problem solvers in line with a particular urban tradition. Gustafson is, therefore, definitely different from her peers in that her work appears each time clearly as an artistic act. She prefers to work over disrupted terrain, where she need not consider the notion of terroir or any other burdensome cultural referent to place. Her conceptual and artistic approach sets her apart from the rest of the French profession where the reference, not to say reverence, to place always plays a key role. This does not in any way mean that her work is disrespectful of the sites on which she intervenes, but there is clearly a priority given to an idea statement about the land. This is probably why most of her projects deal with sites that have been

overwhelmingly disturbed and where a return to a historical referent is often quite impossible. This is the case, for instance, for the Morbras storm reservoir where Gustafson has built a very personal work of land art in the heart of the French rural landscape.

The overall impression of the book is that the text reads well, but lacks strong correlation with the images. There is also at times an obtuse use of jargon and superlatives, like the term "planar three dimensionality" which completely escapes my own Cartesian understanding of things, or a remark about Gustafson's work that "contains a dichotomy of the bucolic and the unexpected". The text should have taken more from the drawings and working process of Gustafson, without necessarily delving into new age intellectualism. The reference to her past experience in textiles could have been an interesting thread to follow, since the notion of landscape drapery appears clearly as a recurrent theme throughout her work.

This is a first attempt at a book on the works of Gustafson which in itself is commendable. I am sure that there will be more writings that will focus more particularly on her specific design philosophy and artistic approach. It would probably have helped the reader to situate the French context and to distinguish between the person and the work a little more. Since Gustafson has now left France and moved her offices back to the United States and England, it will be interesting to see how much the change of culture and context really affects her creative work. I believe that it will remain consistent with her own artistic beliefs and will continue to make waves across the land.

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