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# Landshape Urbanism

## The topography of public space

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At the most fundamental level, the shape of the ground gives form to public spaces. At the city scale, the lay of the land influences the location and typology of public spaces, while at the site scale landform influences the experience and performance of those spaces. And although the leveling out of public spaces for functional purposes recurs throughout urban history, pervasive leveling of the modern city has diminished our connection with the ground beneath our feet. Through a landscape architecturally based framework, this chapter investigates strategies for re-grounding public spaces and re-amplifying engagement with the topography of the city. Specifically, the capacity for topography to influence creative participation, the role of landform as a semi-permeable frame, and the sensory nature of micro-scaled topographies are explored.



## Landscape and urbanism

Although historically grounded in garden making, landscape architecture's primary motivation throughout the past century has been the design of public space. In recent years, this focus extended from parks and plazas into the wider urban fabric, as the landscape urbanism movement advocated for a more ecologically expressive approach to urban design. In contrast to traditional urban design methods that prioritized the built form, landscape emerged as an active agent in the structuring of urban space. However, an unproductive disciplinary standoff ensued, whereby prioritizing extensive urban landscape systems appeared incompatible with more traditional templates for compact, human-scaled cities.

Set within the wider trans-disciplinary project of reconciling landscape and architecturally based approaches to urban design (see Kullmann 2018), this chapter explores the agency of landform in shaping urban public space. Underlying topography establishes a common ground in the sense that landform is integral to the performance of both natural systems and urban form. The intimate connection between landscape and landform is reflected in the suffix *scape*, which is etymologically linked to *shape* (Casey 2002). The *landshape*, both pre-existing and designed, manipulates spatial experience and performance through its contours. Across scales, the shape of the land influences where and how cities are built, where public spaces are situated, and how we interact with those places. As a malleable medium, landform, like sculpture, qualifies as a 'plastic art,' albeit an art that we walk on, not around.

## Topography and the city

Throughout urban history, establishing level ground is a driving factor in the founding of settlements, with the earliest cities of Mesopotamia situated amidst irrigated flood plains. Roman surveyors also favored level sites, for which the surveying staff (*Groma*) was plumbed to sit perpendicular to a horizontal surface (Rykwert 1976). Earthworks were typically engineered for hydraulic or defensive purposes, with the latter reaching its zenith in the star-fortification towns of Renaissance Europe.

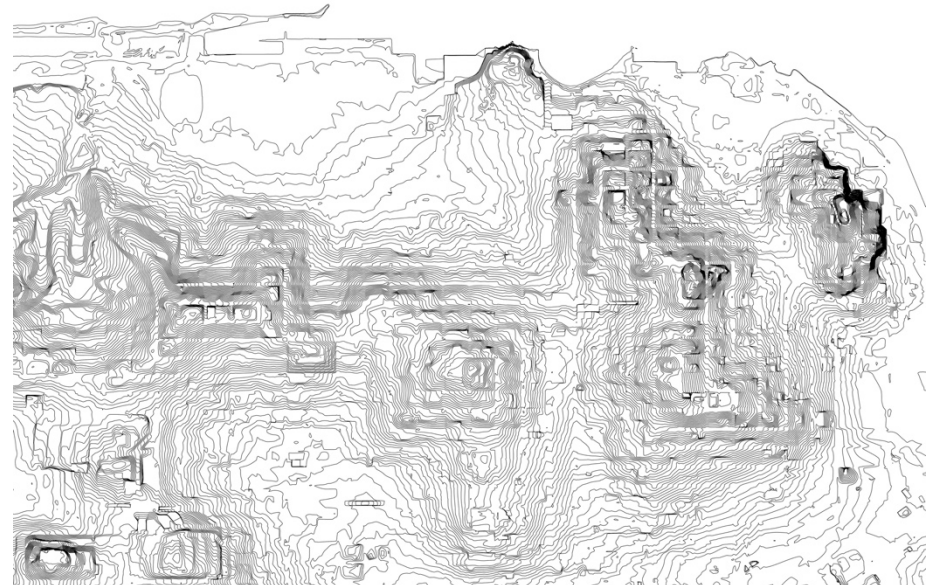


Figure 5.1 Contour map contrasting the street grid and underlying topography of San Francisco's Russian Hill and Telegraph Hill districts

Naturally topographic sites were reserved for refuge settlements, as was the case with the medieval hill towns built following the decline of Roman stability. Centuries later, cities founded during the Colonial Era also often compromised on the levelness criterion in order to take advantage of strategically located natural harbors set into rugged coastlines. In these cases, cutting and filling was typically undertaken to carve functionality from an otherwise dysfunctional landscape (Leatherbarrow 1999). Particularly rugged regions were attributed lower scenic value or avoided as badlands.

Notwithstanding the practical challenges that terrain poses to city making, it is notable that cities founded in topographic settings routinely rank among the world's most distinctive. San Francisco is renowned for the dramatically contrasting manner through which the urban grid and hill parks amplify the underlying topography (see Figure 5.1) (Lipsky 1999). Around Sydney Harbor, protruding peninsulas support geologically expressive public spaces. In the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, unplanned public spaces cling precariously to the slopes of

granite megaliths. And in Hong Kong, ladder-streets lead uphill to botanical gardens and micro-parks that are engineered onto the hillside (Kullmann 2017).

In the twenty-first century, these historically distinct narratives of level and hilly urban settings are increasingly convergent. As global urbanization accelerates, cities originally founded on level ground are pressured to expand into hilly hinterlands, thus becoming more topographic overall. From San Diego to Sao Paulo, Madrid to Nairobi, and from Nagasaki to Perth, the un-leveling of sprawling cities is evident across continents.

### Topography and urban theory

Despite the persistent intersection of cities and landform, topography has generally remained a peripheral topic throughout the past century of urban theory. Within modernism's 'towers in the park' vision, the city was elevated onto *pilotis*, beneath which the greened public realm was to flow unhindered. However, when realized on a large scale through post-war reconstruction in Europe and urban renewal in the US, decoupling the city from the ground unintentionally devalued public space. Too often, modernism's pastoral landscape ideal devolved into flat, sprawling, automobile dominated wastelands (Ingersoll 2006; Jacobs 1961; Sennett 1990).

In reaction to the significant shortcomings of the modern project, two urban models more directly considered landform. Firstly, ecological planning specifically incorporated the criterion of topography through 'suitability-analysis' mapping techniques (see McHarg 1969). Although these methods proved effective at saving steeper terrain for public space and lowering residential densities, the commercial returns from developing desirable topographic locations often outweighed this reasoning. Moreover, by encouraging dispersed development, ecological planning arguably accelerated suburban sprawl (Hill 1992).

The second significant post-modern urban design model, which remains current, takes a more compact approach to cities. Traditional urban design focuses on reinstating the key formal qualities of pre-

industrial settlements. With precedent cities most often sited on navigable waterways, traditional urban design is predisposed to a topographically based town-and-country dichotomy. As depicted in the influential Rural-to-Urban Transect, landform is typically positioned on the periphery as a scenic backdrop to the level urban core (see Duany 2002). Although applicable in certain ideal situations, transects through many metropolitan areas reveal more intricate relationships between urban and land morphologies (see Bosselmann 2011).

### Topography and public space

In the nineteenth-century tradition, the size of public spaces strongly dictated landform strategies. At the smaller end of the spectrum, urban squares and neighborhood parks were ideally level, with levelness permitting ease of construction, circulation, servicing, and use. At the larger scale, public parks were free to undulate. The topographic park served the desire to bring nature into the city, providing a largely immobile population with a physically and psychologically invigorating respite from the industrial metropolis. Paris's vertigo-inducing Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, which occupies a former quarry site, and New York's Central Park, which reveals the city's postglacial bedrock, epitomize mid-nineteenth century land-shaping of public space to create a wild counterpoint to the city (see Figure 5.2).

The layouts of Parc des Buttes-Chaumont and Central Park draw on the traditions of the sublime and picturesque, and on the ancient history of the garden as an imagined representation of a distant aspirational place. However, as the influence of the picturesque faded into the twentieth century, the modern edict of form following function filtered from buildings to the outdoors. At first, this shift transformed the private garden, which was reconfigured from an immersive escape to a functional extension of the building's floor plan (Lewis 1993). By mid-century, automobile affordability meant that city dwellers were more able to venture beyond the city limits to real wild landscapes. It followed that city folk no longer required a simulacrum of that experience to be compressed into an urban park (Cronon 1995).



Figure 5.2 postglacial wilderness creates an explorative retreat from the city in Central Park, New York

With real nature now in reach through an automobile excursion, public space became less of a self-contained explorative experience, and more of an open stage for organized activities. For those activities, and the parking lots that serviced them, the ideal surface was level. While the sports field is a clear example of a level surface accommodating a set program, over time event programming became a consistent theme across the various scales and typologies of public space.

Programming the public realm with events and activities revitalized many public spaces and benefited both citizens and City Hall. Grass-roots organizations seeking to revive community spirit leveraged event programming as a means of reclaiming blighted public space and instilling civic interaction and pride. But perhaps most tellingly, with neoliberal policies impacting the provision and maintenance of public spaces, organized events often provided a lucrative commercial base for economic self-sufficiency (Kullmann 2015).

It followed that even as expanding cities became more topographic overall, a progressive leveling out transpired across all scales of public space. This transformation reflected and reinforced a general homogenization of public space typologies in the contemporary city. Whereas urban squares, urban parks, and other more specialized types such as botanic gardens traditionally exhibited distinct identities and rituals, their events and supporting furniture and props became increasingly uniform.

The topographical and typological homogenization of public space brings unintended deficiencies. Constituting public space as a level stage places a heavy burden on perpetual programmatic novelty and on the support of temporary props and furnishings. If and when the planned events fall idle, leveled public space risks offering no compelling alternative strategy for catalyzing more spontaneous forms of site-specific engagement. The leveled landscape is divested of agency in the sense that rather than actively influencing the body through its contours, it becomes a passive stage for superimposed activities.

### The topography of place

Incorporating, enhancing, or repatriating landform in the public realm suggests a range of potential benefits for urban life. From an experiential perspective, landform is a fundamental component of spatial cognition, orientation, landscape character, and place making (Tuan 1974). Indeed, the intimate connection between topography and home is embedded in the etymology of the Ancient Greek *topos*, which means *place*.

The topography of place is experienced sensorially. The primary topographic sense is kinesthetic, whereby landform and gravity interact with the body to influence balance and orientation. When encountering landform, we deploy proprioception to calibrate the positions and angles of the body in relation to itself and the surrounding physical environment. The secondary topographic sense is visual, whereby landform interacts with sightlines and depth perception to obscure and reveal the environment and enclose and open landscape 'rooms.'

Supplementing the principal senses of kinesthesia and sight, landform also interfaces with the senses of hearing and smell through the deflection or amplification of sounds and scents. And lastly, topography interacts with the most immediate of senses, which is the sense of touch. This interface is most likely to occur in the context of a textured surface, which requires feeling the way with one's feet. In particularly steep situations, the sense of touch potentially engages use of the hands. Moreover, touch receptors on the skin may be indirectly stimulated through exposure to or shelter from the wind, which is topographically shaped.

As perceived through the senses, landform plays a key role in shaping cognition and legibility of the urban environment. Following Kevin Lynch's emphasis of topographic gradients, land slope and morphology provide body-based orientational cues for directional differentiation when navigating the city (Lynch 1960). In addition to the general lay of the land, topographic gradients may include natural hydrological systems that flow through engineered urban landscapes. Alternatively, topographic gradients may leverage artificial landforms that serve as way-finding devices in otherwise flat urban environments with repetitive self-similar layouts.

### **Topographic motifs for public space**

The topographies of public spaces fall into two distinct categories: *discovered* and *designed*. Discovered topography exists prior to the establishment of a public space and is likely to be the reason for an area remaining un-built and consequently designated as public space by default. Discovered topography results either from natural process such as soil erosion and accumulation, or as a by-product of human processes, such as quarrying, landfill, or infrastructural works. The stairway parks of San Francisco, which occupy street easements that are too steep for traffic, are an example of public space adapted to a discovered topography.

Designed topography is formed with intentionality to shape cultural experience and/or the ecological performance of a public space. Designed topography may be fabricated onto or into otherwise level

sites to create new topographic gradients; it may be configured to invoke a historical topography that was lost to the city, such as a gulch or dune; or it may be shaped to enhance or amplify a discovered topographic condition. Gasworks Park in Seattle, in which an expressive landform cloaks a landfill site, is an example of a designed landform amplifying an existing topography. Drawing on this and other examples of discovered and designed landforms, the following section explores three topographic motifs for land-shaping public space.

#### *Motif 1: performance topographies*

The first topographic motif challenges the convention of levelness as the foundation for flexible and vibrant public spaces. To be certain, a flat open space can accommodate the most diverse, manageable, and universally accessible range of events on its surface. It would, for example, be counterproductive to situate a weekend market on the side of a steep hillside instead of a level field, square, or promenade. Nevertheless, utilizing a large flat space often requires an organizational critical mass that may be less responsive to small-scale user-generated initiatives. For individuals or small groups, the apparently limitless programmatic possibilities of a flat expansive space may appear too intimidating to initiate *engagement*. Consequently, people are more likely to remain on the edges of public spaces as bystanders rather than participants.

Topography offers cues or starting points for catalyzing user-generated engagement with public space. Although a variable topographic surface is likely to accommodate fewer superimposed programs than a flat open space, it is more likely to encourage the invention of novel site-specific activities that are not dependent on organized events and supporting apparatus. As Lynch observes, shaping artificial topography into 'plastic uncommitted forms' potentially offers 'suggestive material for spontaneous action' (Lynch 1972, 112).



Figure 5.3 Variable playing surface encourages a site-specific version of basketball at Volkspark, Potsdam



Figure 5.4 Shallow concaved form enhances the square's potency as a central political gathering space on Federation Square, Melbourne

A topographical basketball court located in Volkspark Potsdam playfully illustrates this concept (see Figure 5.3). With the variable surface disrupting conventions that equate a level playing field with a fair game, players are obliged to spontaneously readapt to a site-specific version of basketball. Indeed, the un-level playing surface actually *levels* the field in the sense that informal mixed teams use the topographic variations to offset height differences amongst players. Through the interrelationship of the form of the ground and the activities it nurtures, the playing court shapes an interactive public space.

A spectrum of amorphous 'plastic' landforms potentially offers catalytic surfaces for user-engagement. Latent or active natural processes may directly shape or inspire the design of ground plane. Wind and water may carve out and mound up the ground, while seismic forces may combine with gravity to forge expressive geologies. Alternatively, topography may be shaped in the studio where it is folded from paper, sculpted from clay, or virtually modeled from topological algorithms. Whether simple or complex, or discovered or designed, landform is, in essence, comprised of convex and concave surfaces. These principal land-shapes influence human behavior, with concave forms tending to gather people together, and convex forms tending to be more dispersive.

When fully activated, the hollowed landform of the outdoor amphitheater exemplifies the gathering impulses of concave topography. However, when a large amphitheater configured for traditional performance/audience dynamics lies empty and un-programmed, it may be as unapproachable as a smooth level space. To circumvent this condition, concave forms need not be so deep or typologically specific. As is epitomized in the gently inflected form of Siena's historic Piazza del Campo, shallow concaved forms subtly encourage gathering, influence desire lines and shape other site-specific spatial behaviors. Melbourne's Federation Square offers a contemporary interpretation of this shape. Built over a capped railroad, the shallow concaved form enhances the square's magnetism as a political and cultural event gathering space (see Figure 5.4).



Figure 5.5 Convex and concaved shaped artificial topography at Gasworks Park, Seattle

In contrast to the immersive gathering spaces associated with concave topography, *convex* landforms are inherently more dispersive. By obscuring sightlines between users, convex slopes foster a more individualized landscape experience that draws on the wider landscape and skyscape. The amorphously shaped artificial topography of Seattle's Gasworks Park exemplifies convex public space (see Figure 5.5). The otherwise featureless convex slopes of a prominent hill act as a beacon within the park. Sitting, lying, rolling, and circulating are common activities on the slopes, as park users become both actors and audience in an expansive uncoordinated performance. And yet, even when the park is crowded with people, the convex slope contributes to the sensation of solitude and an expanded sense of personal space.

### *Motif 2: threshold topographies*

The second topographic motif for public space applies landform as a framing device. Within the figure/ground hierarchy of traditional urban form, buildings typically clearly framed town squares and other hard-surfaced public spaces. Around the built edge, streets and doorways formed distinct thresholds through which to enter the public space. In the case of urban parks and other soft-surfaced public spaces, the perimeter fence typically substituted buildings as the framing device. A limited number of gates, which were locked overnight, tightly controlled access and clearly demarcated the park from the city.

In the modern city, public space was systematically de-framed. With modern towers set well back from property lines, the capacity for built form to tightly frame public urban squares was diluted. Concurrently, urban parks were defenced in a process that extended the centuries-long deconstruction of the archetypal garden frame (Kullmann 2016). In European cities, defencing enabled the publicization of royal hunting parks, while in the US it signified the democratization of civic space. Yet it was also symptomatic of a reduction in maintenance and custodianship of public space, with the unfenced urban park forced to fend for itself within a wider landscape of divestment.

With the aim of re-establishing legibility and typologies of public space, traditional urban design approaches have sought to reinstate figure/ground framing. Although productive in the case of urban squares, seeking to re-fence urban parks would be counterproductive for urban communities that seek fewer, rather than additional, physical barriers. Reconstituting the boundary fence also risks escalating the disjunction between the hyper-paced fabric of contemporary cities and the traditionally anchoring role of parks (Ingersoll 1997).

Topography has the potential to intervene in this framing problem, whereby weakly delineated public spaces dissolve into the city, while overly enclosed spaces are overlooked and underused. Reconceived in its purest sense, the frame operates as a semi-permeable threshold



that filters permutations of physical movement, visual connectivity, aural information, and olfactory experience. Thresholds represent a third space that is distinct from inside and outside a public space. Within the frame's thickened threshold zone, the efficient rhythms of the city are slowed down and possibilities for interaction are amplified (Stevens 2007).

Reconceiving the frame as a topographically formed threshold potentially balances the goals of connectivity and distinctiveness in the public realm. When mounded up around the edge of a public space, the crest of an encircling landform creates an artificial horizon line. As occurs with the real horizon (as formed by the curvature of the earth), a topographic horizon encompasses a field of perception. However, whereas the real horizon tracks each person as they move around, an artificial horizon remains tied to the landform and fixed in place. As a result, the topographic horizon of an encircling landform is readily transcended as people move through the space.

The Esplanade in Fremantle, Western Australia illustrates the performance of a topographically formed threshold in a public space. A 120-foot diameter horseshoe shaped mound is the only topographic feature on an otherwise level harbor-side park (see Figure 5.6). The concaved internal space creates useful social facility as a meeting and performing place that is sheltered from the prevailing wind. At six-feet high, the mound's artificial horizon crests just above average eye-height, which is sufficient to visually obscure the interior hollow space from the outside. Physical permeability offsets this subtle visual enclosure, with immediate access and egress enabled in all directions. The openness that results is illustrated in the tendency for people crossing the Esplanade parklands to deviate to the mound, crest the threshold, loiter a while, and then resume their onward journey.

### *Motif 3: micro topographies*

The third topographic motif for public space shifts scales from immersive forms that engage the body visually and kinesthetically, to a finer textural scale that is engaged through the sense of touch. In Classical thought, the immediacy of touch was considered anathema



Figure 5.6 Horseshoe shaped mound creates a space framed by a topographic threshold on the Esplanade, Fremantle

to distant reason and thus relegated to the lowest of the five traditional senses. Direct contact was further tarnished in picturesque ideology, where touch was connected to contamination and intervention. Looking was regarded as a more appropriate expression of the aspiration to un-intrusively comprehend untouched nature (Pollak 1998).

The privileging of vision at the expense of touch extended into the modern city, where the topography of the public realm was smoothed down to the micro, or material, scale. Dematerialization of the physical environment had profound implications for place making. Because touch requires something to be touched, it exists in a symbiotic relationship with materiality, which exerts friction back to the sensing body. Friction between the body and materiality amplifies attentiveness and enhances cues for engaging with our surroundings (Sennett 1998). Our predisposition towards tripping on small aberrations in otherwise flat pavements vividly illustrates our loss of attentiveness in frictionless, visually reliant environments.



Figure 5.7 Deployment of diminutive level changes on Marlene-Dietrich-Platz, Berlin



Figure 5.8 Cobblestones amplifying a previously worn desire path at Park Rabet, East Leipzig

To counteract the smoothing of modern cities, Richard Sennett calls for public spaces that initiate ‘visceral resistance, commitment and expression’ (Sennett 1998, 20). This is not to imply that public space become an adventure playground but is a call for reincorporating micro-topographies in order to retrain our flat-complacency. Whereas we are attuned to quickly pass over smoothed spaces, the abundant friction of roughly textured surfaces slows us down and leads us to engage the immediate environment more mindfully.

The relegation and revival of the cobblestone encapsulates this narrative. Since Roman times, river-sourced cobblestones, and later quarried granite setts, served as a key surfacing material for public spaces. In the twentieth century, in all but the most historic districts, cobbled surfaces were systematically covered with a layer of asphalt or replaced with concrete or modular pavers.

So comprehensive was this material transformation, that by the twenty-first century, in-ground tactile markers for vision-impaired way finding were often the most expressive micro-topographies evident in the smoothed urban environment.

The more recent revival of the cobblestone repatriates friction in the public realm. Although the materiality of the cobblestone is initially transmitted visually, it is primarily imparted texturally via the sense of touch through the feet. In this regard, cobblestones function as inbuilt tactile markers, providing legibility and way finding cues in public space. The cobbled surface marks thresholds, frames spaces, and through its friction, materially communicates an area as a slower space.

Micro topography extends beyond textured surfaces to include small, but nevertheless influential, level changes. For example, stairways with lower than standard risers foster a gentler gait and engender a sense of lightness in the experiencer. Although it is true that stairs associated with major pedestrian thoroughfares must adhere to relevant codes, secondary circulation networks through public spaces can deviate from these norms. In the tradition of the garden path, small-level

changes that follow non-standardized topography can recapture our attentiveness and recalibrate our proprioceptive norms.

Marlene-Dietrich-Platz, in Berlin's Potsdamer Platz precinct, illustrates the deployment of small level changes into an otherwise level urban fabric (see Figure 5.7). In this public theatre forecourt, terraces with two-inch risers are arranged into a shallow amphitheater that descends slightly below street level. Despite the extremely compressed overall level change, the stepped micro-topography creates a niche landscape that performs as a meeting, gathering, observing, and resting space.

In addition to texture and small level changes, a third manifestation of micro-topography occurs through the process of wear. Wear refers to the abrasion or erosion of a surface or material through the friction of repeated use. Although generally interpreted as a negative process in architecture, wear is a more intrinsic and potentially constructive process in the landscape. In comparison with buildings, which are generally fully formed when new, landscapes remain works in progress that deform and adapt to shifting uses over time. Embracing wear challenges inherited notions that frame touch as exerting a negative impact on natural landscapes. Given that urban landscapes are often already highly modified, the act of touching may be reframed as a constructive process, whereby wear and deformation shape culturally legible and useful spaces over time (see Rothery 1912).

Constructive wear may take the form of desire paths, which are etched into the ground through the passage of many feet, thus reconfirming an informal route over time. In instances where these imprinted paths influence more formal circulation patterns, user behavior directly shapes the design of public space. This process is evident in Park Rabet in East Leipzig, where a worn desire path leading towards an adjacent access street was integrated into the landscape design. The desire path is minimally surfaced in loosely spaced granite sets to minimize mud and dust and maintain permeability, but otherwise left intact by the designers (see Figure 5.8).

## Conclusion

From town squares to sports fields, the history of public space is in many regards a story of finding or making level ground. However, when taken to extremes in the quest for efficiency and convenience, leveling and smoothing out the city eliminates the niches and nuances that often grant public spaces their distinctive character. Moreover, notwithstanding the influence of neoliberal conceptions of economically justifiable use, public space is not akin to the floor plate of a commercial building: it is not compelled to be flat so as to maximize potential functionality and economic yield. On the contrary, as the common ground on which a sense of community and place evolve, public space is necessarily more amorphous as it simultaneously endures and adapts over time.

Shaping the ground amplifies the amorphous nature of public space and challenges assumptions that place the choreography of everyday life on a smooth, level stage (Cache 1995). Drawing on the parallel history of 'wild' urban park design, topographic urban design operates across scales. At the site scale, mounded landforms may create semi-permeable thresholds that enframe spaces without enclosing them. At the intermediate scale, concave landforms may subtly calibrate spaces for gathering, while convex forms may foster more contemplative experiences. And at the finer scale, micro topographies may take the form of small-level changes and rough materials that increase surface friction and slow us down.

By reacquainting us with our kinesthetic sense, the experience of topographic space catalyzes creative behavioral responses. When encountering topography, we quickly learn how to make best use of its contours: which route to take to moderate or accentuate gravity; where to situate ourselves in a niche; where to congregate; where to seek out a view or solitude, and which activities to adapt and invent. By acting on the body and shaping use through its contours, topography enhances the agency and possibility of public space.

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