

Wildwood Plaza

A Forest Sense

Robin Winogrand ^[1]

^[1] *Robin Winogrand landscape architecture and urban design (Switzerland)*

Abstract

Wildwood Plaza (Robin Winogrand, 2013) reclaims a tiny, residual forest fragment on the city's edge, transforming it into a recreational space with the power to act as catalyst of the forest imagination. Due to the unique characteristics of forests our imagination has the ability to transform even the most mundane woods into a moving experience. Wildwood Plaza searches to reinterpret these characteristics to become not only rational recreational spaces, but ones in which the immersive, poetic character dominates the experience. The innovation of the project lies in the new interpretation of functional woodland clearings. The design language is one of reduction and simplicity. Not the forest has been designed but its void, the silence of the space has been given character, thus opening up the landscape qualities of the seemingly valueless forest fragment to the urban perception.

Keywords

Forest space, immersive experience, immateriality, landscape architecture, materiality, phenomenology, urban forestry, woodland clearing.

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Introduction

Nowhere {but in the woods} are the two great contemporary modes of reproducing reality, the word and the camera, more at a loss. {The woods} defeat view finder, drawing paper, canvas, they cannot be framed; and words are as futile, hopelessly too laborious and used to capture reality. (Fowles 2010, p. 59)

Referring to the impossibility of conveying the forest experience to another via camera, written words, or painting, Fowles describes how ungraspable the entirety of this experience is. This is even more true if the forest is a remnant tucked within the metropolitan landscape. Today, in ever-shrinking landscape territories on the edge of town, the urban dweller searches for powerful and sensual experiences of 'landscape' and 'nature' just steps away from home. As 'calm' becomes an increasingly rare luxury in contemporary life, residual forest fragments on the urban edge hold the potential to fulfil this contemporary need if only they are recognized as such. The design of *Wildwood Plaza* (Robin Winogrand, 2013) aims to unlock this potential and transform the leftover fringe into a forest experience.

At the edge of the Swiss city of Uster, *Wildwood Plaza* reclaims a tiny wood of not more than 10,000 square metres, transforming it into a recreational space with the power to act as a catalyst for our forest imaginations. Switzerland is a small country composed of a tightly woven mosaic of tiny landscape types, among them leftover woodlands, both privately and publicly owned. Often on the city's edge, these fragments exemplify the merging of urban and natural environments into a metropolitan landscape mosaic. How can we reclaim, re-code, and reinterpret these spaces to become not only rational recreational areas within the urban context but also to draw out their immersive, poetic potential? How can the enigmatic forest experience that Fowles described become a part of the urban realm?

The history of forest imagery in Switzerland is characterized by a duality between the rational and the irrational, the pragmatic and the poetic. For centuries, forestry laws and maintenance regimes have shaped this imagery. Trees large enough to yield profits are regularly felled to make way for young trees. Today, on the urban fringe, young groves of trees are omnipresent, while Swiss romantic paintings of forests attest to their potentially mesmerising beauty and our attachment to the power of this landscape type. Due to the unique characteristics of forests, imagination has the ability to transform even the most mundane patches of woods into moving, if not magical, experiences. *Wildwood Plaza* seeks to reinterpret these characteristics, transforming rational recreational space into an immersive, poetic experience. The innovation of the project lies in its new interpretation of the banal *Waldplatz*, or functional seating spaces within the woods. *Wildwood Plaza* immerses one in the sensation of the forest while almost invisibly providing leisure uses. In the design, the recreational voice bows to the forest, tucked into its enveloping experience, which has the ability to simultaneously activate all of our senses, body, mind, and spirit.

To this aim, the project's concept and design language were inspired by several phenomena that might be summed up as: the archaic voice of forests, the forest sense, and dissolving light and space.



FIGURE 1

Wildwood Plaza. Wildwood Plaza reclaims a tiny, residual forest fragment, transforming it into a recreational space with the power to act as a catalyst for our forest imaginations. The project subtly inserts public space into an existing woodland, allowing its strong characteristics to be the main narrative and experience of the space. The natural history of each of the three woodland clearings, which has shaped their imagery and experience, is thus brought to expression. (Photo by Valentini, D., 2014).

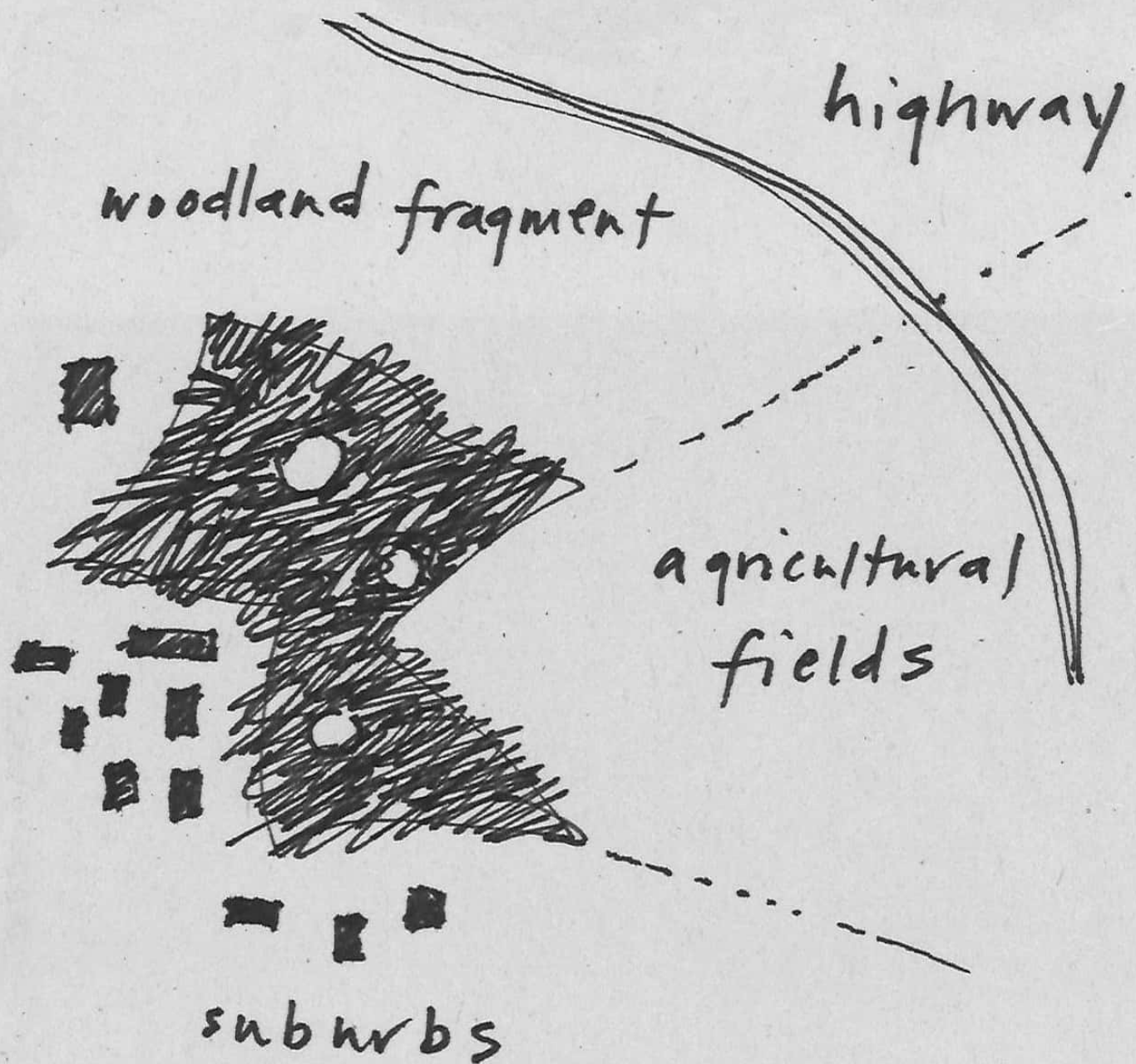


FIGURE 2

Task, Site, Design Response. In 2012, landscape architect Robin Winogrand was hired with the pragmatic planning task of creating a path traversing a small forest to connect suburban housing with the nearby 'open landscape' of walking paths, agricultural fields, woodland patches, and highways. In addition, the brief called for a recreational forest experience. In Switzerland, people often say, 'let's go for a walk in the woods,' generally referring to the generic experience of walking among standardized forestry-planted and maintained trees, standardized benches, and grilling stations, which are happily accepted as a natural experience. However, studying the tiny woodland site revealed three vividly contrasting forest types, just a few hundred meters apart, each showing strikingly different imagery and experiences of being in the woods. They created a display of nature as a processual creature of response, expressing their ephemeral conditions over time. (Drawing by Winogrand, R., 2013)



FIGURE 3

Three Existing Forest Imageries. Local foresters explained that these forest imageries were the direct result of the two strongest hurricanes to sweep through Europe in recent history: Vivian in 1990 and Lothar in 1999. On the protected side of the wooded hill, stately climax Beech trees (*Fagus sylvatica*) remain standing, creating a cathedral-like space. On the most exposed eastern slope of the hill, the beech forest was completely razed to the ground. Young beeches have since reappeared, forming a dense jungle of pioneer vegetation. On the third slope, shallow-rooted trees were violently torn out of the ground, creating an almost apocalyptic scene where trees struggle to survive, their trunks twisting, deforming, and shooting upwards towards the light. (Photos by Winogrand, R., 2013)





FIGURE 4

Eichenwald. Swiss romantic paintings of forests attest to their potentially mesmerizing beauty and our attachment to the power of this landscape type. This iconic painting captures both a factual, detailed account of each leaf, as well as the entirety of the millions of leaves creating the forest perception. Together they make up the richness and ungraspability and what Fowles calls the explorability of forests. (Fowles 2010: 56)





FIGURE 5

Der Bauplatz wird Gerodet. For centuries, woodlands were a central natural resource for Switzerland, regulated by a myriad of strict forestry laws. Their development as a renewable resource was viewed as crucial for economic survival. Values such as beauty, biodiversity, or recreational experience have only recently been recognized as qualities that forestry should uphold, often provoking resistance from foresters. (Painting by Humbert Mareschat, 1585-86. Courtesy of Bernisches Historisches Museum)



FIGURE 6

The Archaic Voice of Forests. The title Wildwood Plaza refers to the convergence of semi-natural wildness with urbanites seeking to embrace this sense of the wild in increasingly brief moments of free time. Even young, artificially forested trees, no matter how scraggly, seem to possess the archaic and iconic power to transcend mere visual appearance and directly resonate with what John Fowles describes as the green man within us: 'There is something in the nature of nature, in its immediacy, its apparent transience, its creative vitality, and hidden potential, that closely corresponds with the wild, or green man, in our psyches; and it is something that vanishes as soon as it is reduced to [...] a mere classifiable object' (2010, p. 51). Their inherent wild energy is akin to the timeless natural forces of fire or water. The design elements of the project therefore take a visually subordinate role to the woodland itself. (Photo by Winogrand, R., 2013)



FIGURE 7

Dissolving Space and Light. Forests enable dwellers to quickly surrender to the pleasure of disorientation that woods offer. Forest spaces are densely occupied by trees, yet we can move through them, our bodies swiveling in all directions, focusing on nothing in particular. With no fixed front, back, left, or right, we enter a state of drifting, losing our spatial orientation. Forests have the power to immediately immerse our senses, our embodied selves becoming absorbed even in the smallest patches of woods. Adding to this disorientation is the dissolution of distinction between objects and empty space. Instead, there is an endless layering of minute spatial details created by thousands of individual leaves. The imagery of leaves and their interstitial spaces captivates our minds and challenges our perceptual clarity. (Photo by Winogrand, R., 2013)



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FIGURE 8

Being and Circumstance. This phenomenological quality of dissolving light and space resonates with the work of artist Robert Irwin. He has explored the perceptual dissolution of figure and ground, object and context in much of his artwork. In his untitled installation at Wellesley College, USA, a low brushed steel wall is positioned in front of a lake, nestled into the landscape beneath a grove of trees. The shapes of the leaves are cut out of the steel, with the negative spaces between them left as solid steel. This visual effect transforms the typically solid leaves into voids that dissolve into the dancing light reflected from the water behind them. Conversely, the usual voids, such as fragments of sky and light between the leaves, become an almost imperceptible, changing presence of brushed steel. His piece mimics the dazzling effect that experiencing forest spaces has on us. (Installation by Robert Irwin, 2008 © 2024, ProLitteris, Zurich)







FIGURE 9

Recomposing the Forest. The objective of Wildwood Plaza evolved into creating a serene environment where the storytelling of the forest could speak with its own voice, facilitating an embodied experience – the universal experience of a forest, alongside the deeply personal sensations it invokes. Towards this aim, the project reconfigures the materials of the forest itself to be seen in a new light. One must look twice. At first glance, it appears unremarkable, yet it introduces a language we have not encountered before. The emphasis on simplicity and reduction highlights the diversity of forest imagery. Here, there is nothing to do but gaze at the surrounding woods. The design focuses not on the plaza itself but on its void, imbuing the silence of the space with character, inviting an intuitive grasp of forest ambiance. Wildwood Plaza is simply a place to sit and observe the growth of the woods. (Photo by Kleindienst, R., 2017)



FIGURE 10

Paving and Seating: The Imagination of Matter and Material Immateriality. In the design, materiality and immateriality are treated with equal importance. The project's imagery and materials mimic the forest itself. Paving and seating seamlessly blend into their surroundings, ensuring that the forest remains the primary experience. The tree trunk paving encourages visitors to tread lightly on the semi-natural floor, to connect deeply with the place. Irregularly shaped acacia trunks, sourced from local fallen or felled trees, showcase the unique growth of each tree. The concept for the paving drew inspiration from concrete imitation wood pavers found in local DIY building supply shops, as well as historic wooden paving blocks used in old Swiss factories. The head forester of the city was consulted to construct the woodland floor, which initially provoked his anger. He lamented that in his youth, there was no need to destroy woodlands to create recreational spaces; simply walking or playing in the forest sufficed to experience the agglomeration or urban periphery woods. (Photos by Valentini, D., 2014; Winogrand, R., 2012)



FIGURE 11

Three Circular Clearings. Uniting the three clearings is their circular form, subtly revealing and highlighting the distinct differences in forest imagery. Within each clearing, there is an expression of unique voice and history, shaping its identity through dimensions, height, topography, density of greenery, edge density, and the form and expression of vegetation. The circular void functions as a 'looking glass' or all-encompassing cyclorama. As we move around it, there is no need for a focal point. The form underscores the multi-directional, non-directional, and anti-hierarchical experience of forests. Rationally, the clearings offer a simple place to sit. Phenomenologically, the interplay of light and shadow, the density of a space that is simultaneously full yet penetrable by our bodies, becomes an irrational task of drifting and being captivated in its own right. (Plan by Winogrand, R., 2013)



FIGURE 12

The First Clearing. On the western slope of the wooded hill, strong climax trees weathered the hurricanes, sheltered and preserved. Below their grand silver trunks and lofty crowns lies a clearing described by Baudelaire as a 'temple of living pillars' (as quoted in Fowles 2010, p. 58), embodying the visual and emotional power of old trees as archetypes. Light filters through the dense leaf canopy from above, casting a luminous glow. The small open space of ten metres diameter accentuates the towering verticality of this cathedral-like forest space. Massive roots, with their irregular and organic strength, disrupt the pure geometric form of the circular clearing. In autumn, the golden beech leaves illuminated by sunlight intensify the natural grandeur of this simple space. (Photo by Valentini, D., 2014)



FIGURE 13

The Second Clearing. The Beech tree, with its robust root system, contributes to both the creation of the majestic climax forest in the first clearing and the vigorous young pioneer vegetation in the second. The perimeter of this plaza is bordered by a dense, impassable jungle of delicate beech pioneer growth. The void of the clearing is carved into this jungle. Selected trees of other species, such as Wild Cherry or Alder, are deliberately left standing within the void, disrupting both the geometric clarity of the circle and the homogeneous image of the beech forest. This largest and flattest circle, measuring 20 meters in diameter, is situated closest to the main path and adjacent to a boy scout cabin, intended for their use. Here, the created intimacy fosters a sense of gathering, socially charged as a distinct spatial room within the forest structure. (Photo by Valentini, D., 2014)





FIGURE 14

The Second Clearing in winter. In winter snow, the clearing undergoes a visual abstraction akin to a black and white photograph. The slender, chaotic, vertical trunks of the young pioneer Beech growth imbue the scene with a wild and untamed imagery. Simultaneously, they create a uniform filter through which the seating elements are faintly perceptible. (Photo by Valentini, D., 2015)



FIGURE 15

The Third Clearing. On the northern slope, the third and middle-sized plaza is situated amidst the most intricate woodland imagery shaped by past storms. The aftermath resembles an apocalyptic scene, where wild, irregular, and sloped topography bears witness to the history of glacial melt. Deformed trunks, water shoots, and rhizomes sprawl in all directions, each struggling for survival. Accordingly, the design of this clearing highlights and showcases its contorted trees, unusual topography, and sloping ground plane. Here, hurricanes violently uprooted shallow-rooted trees, revealing the peculiar beauty of nature's deformation and adaptation. Trees with shallow root balls, torn from the ground, lie like fallen giant brooms, grasping for light. During the preparation for construction, it was challenging to persuade the foresters to appreciate the deformed trees as a deliberate quality to be showcased. (Photos by Valentini, D., 2014)



FIGURE 16

Patina, Decay, Vandalism: What client wants to see their project disappear? Between the initial construction captured in the first photos from 2013 and the subsequent image from 2017, a series of transformative processes have shaped the Wildwood Plaza project—experiences we can learn from, appreciate, or lament. Weathering has revealed the poetic beauty of patina, with the woods taking on a subtle decay. The boy scouts' decision to build fires directly on the paving has left charcoal marks, human traces etched into the space. Unfortunately, the conceptual insights and specialized maintenance practices unique to Wildwood Plaza were not passed on to new city officials. Consequently, the decision was made to remove the deformed trees prominently displayed in the third clearing, deemed flawed and unsightly by foresters. The project now gradually recedes into its natural surroundings. Biodiversity increases day by day as mushrooms and moss spread across the decaying clearings. This prompts reflection on when and how to decide on renewal. Should the project undergo rejuvenation, or should its disappearance be seen as a natural performance piece orchestrated by nature? (Photo by Kleindienst, R., 2017)





FIGURE 17

The Forest Sense. 'For a scientist like Humboldt, who was trying to understand nature, [...] the dualism between the external and internal world...was the most important question. Humans were like citizens of two worlds, occupying both.' (Wulf 2015, p. 35). Imagination mirrors our inner world. Landscape architects build space outside of the body. The inner and outer world have an inseparable relationship, as this quote expresses. The forest sense is the meeting of a person with a place, yet not about human uses but the inter-dynamic between forest and the phenomenon of our perceptive experience. The project therefore reduces the design inputs to the essential characteristics and experiences of the woods themselves.

To circle back to the topic of urban forestscapes and their duality of rational and irrational characteristics, it seems appropriate to heed the cautionary words of our forest sage, John Fowles, one last time. 'Achieving a relationship with nature is both a science and an art beyond mere knowledge [...] and I now think beyond [...] transcendentalism. [...] I do not believe nature is to be reached [...] by turning it into a therapy, a free clinic [...] The subtlety of our alienation from it [...] is our need to use it in some way, to derive some personal yield. We shall never fully understand nature [...] until we dissociate the wild from the notion of usability.' (Fowles 2010, p. 39). (Photo by Winogrand, R., 2015)

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