

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Reading Landscapes [EDRA/Places Award 2008 -- Juror Commentaries]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/96d1k0vt>

### Journal

Places, 20(3)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Steiner, Frederick

### Publication Date

2008-12-15

Peer reviewed

# Reading Landscapes

## Frederick Steiner

A book award was introduced for the first time to this awards program in 2008. As jurors from previous years have observed, books in the research category often have an unfair advantage over scholarly work that may be less formally presented, as reports or peer-reviewed articles. The decision was thus made to recognize this difference and add a seventh prize.

The new category, which received nineteen entries, proved to be one of the most challenging to judge. The landscape architecture books were especially impressive. Three reviewed the accomplishments, respectively, of the late Karl Linn; of Peter Latz and Partners; and of Chris Reed and his StossLU landscape urbanism colleagues. Thoughtful books on open space and experiential landscapes were also considered, including one on aural landscapes. There was even an in-depth case study of a green roof at the headquarters of the American Society of Landscape Architects, in Washington, D.C.

For the jury, the final choice eventually came down to Mark Gillem's *America Town*, the eventual winner, or Tom Campanella's *The Concrete Dragon*. The winner is described elsewhere in this issue. However, for several jurors, *The Concrete Dragon* was a strong alternative. A superbly produced book, it reflects the author's deep association with China, and uses photographs to illustrate the nature and scale of that country's changing landscape. Since the jury convened, I have read *The Concrete Dragon*, and can recommend it to everyone interested in China's rapid urbanization. It is a remarkable book.

### The Languages of Landscapes

Of the other submissions, I would like to briefly describe two handsome books that focus on new ways to read landscapes. In his wonderful *E 40°* (University of Virginia Press, 2006), Jack Williams explores small towns along the eastward-angling axis of the Appalachian cordillera. The other, *Deccan Traverses*, by Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha (Rupa & Co., 2006), explores the terrain of the city of Bangalore, India, using innovative graphic tools to represent human agency in landscape.

Jack Williams begins his book with a geological map of the eastern United States, "showing the great sweep of the Appalachian Mountains east 40 degrees from Alabama to the coast of Maine" (p. VII). The maps that follow, some conventional, some less so, include historical maps, U.S.

Geological Survey maps, street maps, topographic maps, and figure-ground maps familiar to landscape architects, planners, and architects. Williams also presents stacked axonometric diagrams to illustrate relationships, and draws on historical, aerial, and contemporary photographs for his analysis.

Mathur and da Cunha employ similar devices, but are even more unconventional in their mapping. In this regard, they build on their earlier book, *Mississippi Floods: Designing a Shifting Landscape* (a work cited by Williams, and the winner of a 2001 EDRA/*Places* research award). Where Williams draws simple diagrams of almost De Stijl quality to illustrate typologies along the 40 degrees east Appalachian axis, Mathur and da Cunha produce seductive, dense collages to reveal the complex terrain of the Deccan Plateau—the location of Bangalore, "the Garden City of India." They also use drawings and paintings from the past and employ transects to tell their interwoven tale of people and place.

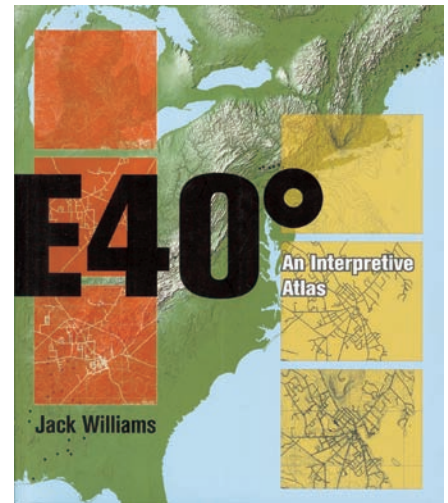
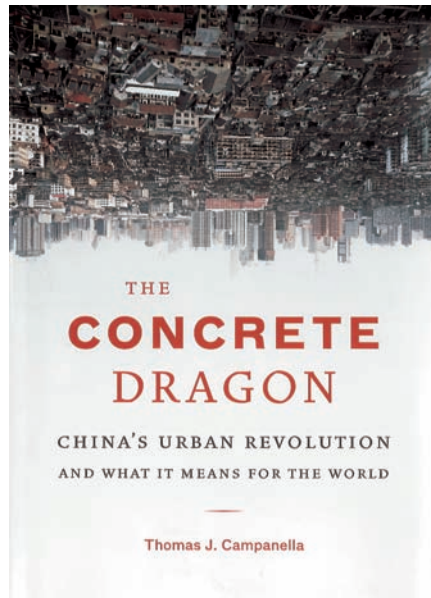
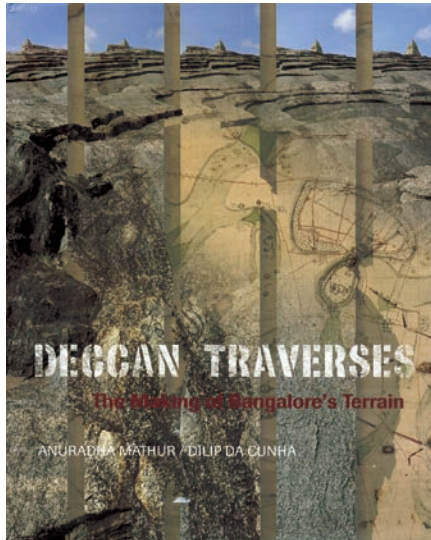
The brilliant graphic explorations by Mathur and da Cunha contain a deep tapestry of information. They weave visual strains to create dazzling screen prints that compel the reader to look more closely and to return repeatedly as additional information is introduced. The prints come at the ends of chapters as a visual synthesis of information and a bridge to the next. For example, pages 86 and 87 contain the screen prints "Baseline 1" and "Baseline 2" that conclude the chapter titled "Base Line."

That chapter is also part of a section of *Deccan Traverses* devoted to the nineteenth-century British survey of India, called the Great Trigonometrical Survey. Mathur and da Cunha describe how Colonel William Lambton established this survey, beginning with the measurement of a baseline in Bangalore in 1800. Through maps, transects, drawings, and photographs, they then document Lambton's efforts to create orderly maps from the messy natural terrain. Similarly, Williams shows how settlements along the Appalachians impose order through gridded street layouts and courthouse squares.

Whereas Williams explores a region and places familiar to me and other Americans, Mathur and da Cunha address a more exotic terrain. In *E 40°*, as new landscape and urban relationships are revealed, we learn much about a prominent American region. While I learned much from *Deccan Traverses*, the Bangalore region remains exotic to me; perhaps it has grown even more so.

Both books open new territories for understanding and representing landscapes. In each case, the strong visual images are reinforced by thoughtful prose that tells engaging stories about living landscapes.

**Opposite:** The covers of Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha's *Deccan Traverses*; Tom Campanella's *Concrete Dragon*; and Jack Williams' *E 40°*.



## Landscape Urbanism

In addition to the fine landscape-oriented books, urbanism was another dominant theme among the strongest books. *The Concrete Dragon*, *America Town*, and others focused on urbanism or critiques of urban design. Of these, Nan Ellin's *Integral Urbanism* was noteworthy, advancing a new theory for urban design. We also reviewed significant books with fresh ideas in both urbanism and landscape. *StossLU*, with its focus on the emerging landscape-urbanism concept, bridges the gap between the urbanist books and the landscape books.

The most powerful books in both groups are those that enable us to see something we don't normally see. For example, *E 40°* takes common landscapes and reveals their hidden form, in a way that is quite powerful and beautiful. *Deccan Traverses* does this too, by demonstrating that what we perceive as natural is actually made by people.

Even in the most built-up places, nature is present. By learning to read how culture and nature combine to form landscapes, designers and planners can be more effective in creating the landscapes of tomorrow.

### Cited Competition Books

Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

Tom Campanella, *The Concrete Dragon: China's Urban Revolution and What It Means for the World* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008).

Nan Ellin, *Integral Urbanism* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Karl Linn, *Building Commons and Community* (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2007).

Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha, *Deccan Traverses: The Making of Bangalore's Terrain* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2006).

Chris Reed, *StossLU* (Seoul: C3 Publishing Co., 2007).

Udo Weilacher, *Syntax of Landscape: The Landscape Architecture of Peter Latz and Partners* (Basel: Birkhäuser; London: Springer, 2008).

Christian Werthmann, *Green Roof: A Case Study* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007).

Jack Williams, *E 40°: An Interpretive Atlas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).