

Book Criticism: A Review of Landscape Architectural Publications

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This issue of *Landscape Review* is devoted entirely to book reviews. As a survey of recent publications in landscape architecture, it offers a snapshot of how the discipline, and the reviewers, as well as the books themselves, provide insights into key concerns.

The term 'Book Criticism' is suggested here in preference to 'Book Reviews', which is somewhat limited in scope. Merely reviewing a book, and passing a judgement on it, can be useful in the way film reviews provide a guide as to whether a film is worth watching. But a critique builds the review into a wider reflection on the book's theme, and on the discipline in general. Book criticism generates a discourse around the published works and raises further observations and questions about the profession and the discipline.

Parallels can be drawn between criticising a book and the critique of design. One of the most useful frameworks for design criticism is Wayne Attoe's (1978) *Architecture and Critical Imagination*, which is structured around three purposes for critique: normative, interpretive and descriptive. Normative criticism is evaluative, assessing the designed work against standards or norms. By contrast, interpretive criticism bypasses evaluation; instead it uses the object of criticism as the inspiration for a creative response, which, as Attoe (1978) notes, might be 'impressionistic, evocative, or advocatory in character' (p 9). Finally, the aim of Attoe's category of descriptive criticism is not to evaluate a work, but rather to situate it within the life of the designer (or author, in the case of a book), the process of its creation or the influence of the context it responds to.

The six book critics in this issue cover the full spectrum of Attoe's three categories in evaluating, interpreting and describing the books that are the focus of their papers. The lengthy reference lists of some critiques are a simple but clear signal that this issue of *Landscape Review* not only engages with the books that were assigned for review, but also takes in a vast terrain of literature that influences thinking in our discipline. Contributing to the diverse and lively collection of critiques in this issue are authors from a range of geographical locations, from the USA to Europe, and from Dubai to New Zealand.

First up is Katherine Melcher's critique of three recently published books, each of which draws together numerous threads on contemporary landscape architecture. These edited books are: M Elen Deming's (2015) *Values in Landscape Architecture and Environmental Design: Finding Center in Theory and Practice*; Christophe Girod and Dora Imhof's (2017) *Thinking the Contemporary Landscape*; and the Landscape Architecture Foundation's (2018) *The New Landscape Declaration: A Call to Action for the Twenty-first Century*. Melcher's interpretive critique of

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these books creates an overview of landscape architecture's dilemma of seeking a sense of uniqueness while aspiring to a more expansive view. Through her critique, Melcher tackles the slipperiness of the very idea of landscape itself, the state of theory in the profession, and an opening out to global issues in which landscape architecture has a role to play. In Attoe's terms, this critique gives a sense of an advocatory position; of challenging landscape architecture to consider its role in society.

Challenging landscape architecture's core values and practices is also a thread running through Rod Barnett's critique of Julian Raxworthy's (2018) *Overgrown: Practices between Landscape Architecture and Gardening*. While for some the connections between gardening and landscape architecture are problematic, Barnett reminds us that the profession grew out of a 5,000-year history of garden design. He points to Raxworthy's neologism, the 'viridic', which seeks to overcome the schism between humans and the non-human world through an involvement in the world of plants, particularly through gardening. Within a richly philosophical context, Barnett positions Raxworthy's book into a reflection on aesthetics and landscape architects' predilection for the distanced practice of representation (rather than getting our hands dirty) and, like Melcher, unsettles and disrupts any complacency about the core of the profession or discipline.

Another book critical of landscape architecture's collective values and practices is Margaret Grose's (2017) *Constructed Ecologies: Critical Reflections on Ecology with Design*. In a descriptive critique, Gill Lawson navigates through Grose's book, drawing attention to the key concepts and challenges that the book offers. She emphasises how Grose challenges landscape architecture to look closely at itself, particularly in considering the ways science is used (or abused) in the design process. While the discipline might be struggling to find its uniqueness, to assert its general applicability, to re-tune practice towards more embodied ways of working, it needs also to be mindful of how rigorous and creative incorporation of science into designing is fundamental to a relevant and innovative landscape architecture.

Science also gets a close examination in Rudi van Etteger's review of Andrew Lothian's (2017) *The Science of Scenery: How We View Scenic Beauty, What It Is, Why We Love It, and How to Measure and Map It*. Van Etteger gives a vivid sense of the expansiveness of this book, questioning whether its length of almost 500 pages is justified – an argument that is reminiscent of a film critic begging for some judicious editing to craft a more focused narrative. In critiquing Lothian's approach, van Etteger deftly positions it alongside other ways of addressing questions of 'scenery' and the complexities of aesthetics that this entails. Importantly, van Etteger cautions against a conflation of landscape quality and scenic beauty, and offers a range of philosophical positions to consider as alternatives, including that the ordinary is also significant in our perception of landscape.

The final two critiques focus on books with specific geographical orientations – New Zealand and the Middle East. Andreas Wesener critiques Garth Falconer's (2015) *Living in Paradox: A History of Urban Design across Kaingā, Towns and Cities in New Zealand*, which, like Lothian's *The Science of Scenery*, is another massive volume at over 500 pages. Wesener criticises the book's chronological approach to development on the grounds that it creates repetition and confusion. Overall the book is also wanting in its lack of easy navigation coherence, Wesener

observes, and he raises questions over the domain of a profession. While other book reviewers in this issue have highlighted the sticky terrain of landscape architecture's core knowledge and practices, in this case the focus is on urban design. Wesener advises that the book does not contribute much of depth to a critique of the discipline of urban design, as it is primarily descriptive rather than analytical. Here he draws attention to the distinction between the expectations of a scholarly academic book and one written for and by professionals. It is a point that connects to the tensions that are implicit in some of the other critiques in this issue, based on the often marked differences between the ways landscape architecture is theorised and how it is practised.

Finally, Julian Raxworthy critiques two recent books about landscape architecture in desert environments – Gareth Doherty's (2017) book on Bahrain, *Paradoxes of Green: Landscapes of a City-State*, and Julian Bolleter's (2019) *Desert Paradises: Surveying the Landscapes of Dubai's Urban Model*. As an interpretive critique, Raxworthy's response to the two books is impressionistic, interwoven with his own recent experiences of desert dwelling. He also deftly describes how these books fit into the oeuvres of their authors, and the similarities between them, which in itself provides an insight into the world of academic publishing. Raxworthy's observations on the two books illuminate the complexities of languages in the Persian Gulf region, including environmental and technological challenges, as well as religious and political dimensions of the cultural landscape.

Together the six critiques covering 10 books, and alluding to many others, push and pull landscape architecture in many directions. This approach attests to a healthy discipline – as Melcher notes in her critique, self-reflection within the discipline and profession is increasingly complex. Arguably, landscape architecture for much of the twentieth century could be characterised as being focused primarily on practical and professional concerns, rather than on theory and critique. Early in that century, Hubbard and Kimball (1959, original foreword from 1919) observed, 'Nearly all the trained men in the field are giving their energies to active practice rather than to theorization or writing' (p vii). Albert Fein's seminal report in 1972 concludes that the profession was more craft oriented than theoretical in outlook, and in 1995 Owen Manning suggests the 'common perception [is] that landscape design is an empirical process lacking a theoretical base to support what is actually practised: to explain why it "works"' (p 2). Further, Peter Walker and Melanie Simo (1994) suggest that the lack of theorising and critique can be attributed to the very nature of landscape architects, in that they tend to be 'reticent, discreet, accommodating and not given to undue publicity' (p 3). Landscape architects, they observe, 'tend to be doers rather than critics or philosophers [and] they have tended to focus on the practical work at hand' (p 4).

Overall the focus on the books critiqued in this issue is reassuring as much as it is unsettling. While the apparent maturing of the profession reaches a milestone of sorts, signalling landscape architects have gone beyond being merely doers, the need for vigilance and for brave and strong voices is also clear. These six critiques give a refreshing sense of the presence of the writers, often writing in the first person. While much academic writing in the discipline remains formal and disembodied, here we gain an engaging sense of the book critics voicing opinions,

drawing on their wide knowledge of landscape architecture, and of contributing to the health of the discipline through challenge and debate. Thank you to all of the book critics who wrote for this issue, and infused this experiment of focusing an entire issue on books with such an intriguing and thought-provoking discourse.

The diversity of books, and of critics, in this issue suggests that it would be useful to have another issue with a book criticism theme in the future. If you are an author or publisher, please get in touch with any books for review. Likewise, if you are a reviewer or essayist interested in critiquing books, please let me know. Contact the editor, Jacky Bowring, at jacky.bowring@lincoln.ac.nz

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