

Valuing the Discipline: Refrains and Riffs

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The New Landscape Declaration: A Call to Action for the Twenty-first Century, Landscape Architecture Foundation (ed), Los Angeles, CA: Rare Bird Books, 2018, ISBN: 978-1-945-57269-2 (hardcover)

Thinking the Contemporary Landscape, Christophe Girot and Dora Imhof (eds), New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2017, ISBN: 978-1-616-89520-4 (paperback); 978-1-616-89559-4 (ebook)

Values in Landscape Architecture and Environmental Design: Finding Center in Theory and Practice, M Elen Deming (ed), Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2015, ISBN: 978-0-807-16078-7 (paperback); 978-0-807-16079-4 (ebook)

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The number of landscape architecture theory books published over the past few years¹ suggests an increasingly complex level of self-reflection within the profession. Three edited volumes in particular – *The New Landscape Declaration*, *Thinking the Contemporary Landscape* and *Values in Landscape Architecture* – debate and define the value of landscape architecture as a profession and discipline.

The New Landscape Declaration (The Declaration) was published from a summit convened by the Landscape Architecture Foundation with the purpose ‘to look at how landscape architecture can make its vital contribution to help solve the defining issues of our time’ (p xvi). *The Declaration* shares the 32 individual proclamations and nine panel discussions from the summit along with its synthesis, ‘The New Landscape Declaration’, a 400-word ‘new manifesto for the landscape architecture discipline’ (p xvi). *Thinking the Contemporary Landscape (Thinking)*, edited by Christophe Girot and Dora Imhof, came out of a symposium intended to ‘contrast the current [positivistic scientific] discourse with a more philosophical and poetic stance’ (p 7). *Values in Landscape Architecture and Environmental Design (Values)*, edited by M Elen Deming, brings values more explicitly into the discussion, by reflecting on ways in which landscapes incorporate and express cultural norms, with a special focus of the agency of design to add value to places.

All three of these books wrestle with two seemingly counteractive forces: a desire to find a centre for landscape architecture as a discipline by defining its unique value; and a desire to expand its value within society. *The Declaration* merges ideals of a core (through the synthesised manifesto) with the diversity found within the individual proclamations and discussions. However, in his



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introduction to the book, Richard Weller (2018) acknowledges that these forces exist in tension:

I am keenly aware that institutions, schools and practices can hardly countenance expansion when they are struggling just to hold their ground, but if the profession is to close the gap between what it *says* and what it *does*, then individuals and organizations need to be more ambitious and more adventurous. (p 10)

Although Girot and Imhof's explicit aim in *Thinking* is to make space for both poetic and scientific understandings of place, they also desire a more coherent practice. They worry that '[l]andscape architecture suffers from broad intellectual dispersion and tremendous cultural disparity, precisely at a moment when direction and cohesion are indispensable to our civilization' (p 7). Deming's subtitle 'Finding Center in Theory and Practice' clearly indicates that centring landscape architecture is a primary concern.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1987) essay '1837: Of the Refrain'² provides a useful analogy for this tension between centring and expansion. The Refrain refers to a process of territorialisation, which involves three moments. First, within chaos, a child hums a song to comfort himself. Second, the child secures and stabilises this comfort by making a circle around it. Third, 'one opens the circle a crack' and 'launches forth' (ibid, p 311). Deleuze and Guattari claim that 'these are not three successive moments in an evolution. They are three aspects of a single thing, the Refrain (*ritournelle*)' (p 312). The diverse contributions to these three books, I think, are part of landscape architecture's refrain; they help mark landscape architecture's territory, define its boundaries and suggest new trajectories or lines of flight.

This review reflects on this refrain found in all three books: How is landscape architecture marked as a unique discipline? What circles are drawn to define the discipline's territory? In what directions can landscape architects venture forth, especially if one aims to demonstrate landscape architecture's relevance to today's global challenges? My impression is that landscape architecture is at a point where its practitioners can engage with all three questions at once, as in Deleuze and Guattari's Refrain. There is a core to the profession, simply and eloquently stated by *The Declaration* as 'the profession charged with designing the common ground' that is 'the landscape itself' (p xxii).

Another refrain that runs through the books is a concern about current social and global conditions such as climate change, globalisation, social justice and urbanisation. To address these concerns, landscape architecture cannot remain content with the circle it has drawn; it needs to venture forth, explore new trajectories.

One of the greatest contributions, collectively, that these three compilations provide is the diversity of suggested trajectories, potential directions through which the discipline can consider its relevance and value. Each of these three books provides a rich compilation of significant ideas and examples that, in Weller's (2018) words, 'are good to think with' (p 11); they all provide worthwhile food for thought for landscape architecture professionals, students and academics. *The Declaration* succeeds as 'a call for personal reflection on what it means to be a landscape architect at this moment in history' (ibid, p 11). Reading through the proclamations, one is inspired to reflect on the motivations



behind one's own design practice. *Thinking* contains more theoretical reflections on how landscapes mean and how design can engage with that meaning. *Values* provides a mixture of case study research and theoretical pieces that question the political values expressed in and through landscapes.

Weller (2018) warns that 'it is ultimately criticality, not backslapping, that forges a profession that the public looks up to' and voices a concern that 'landscape architecture still lacks the self-critical philosophical underpinnings that are needed to restrain its messianic tendencies and make more credible its claims' (p 8). This review is my riff on the refrain of landscape architecture in an attempt to provide some criticality. In doing so, I reflect on some themes found within and between these texts, but this review is not a comprehensive overview of them (that would take significant time because each of these three is a rich compilation of many interesting, intersecting perspectives on landscapes and landscape architecture). It is also not a balanced or neutral review of the three editorial positions. As a riff, this review is only one improvisation with the aim of inspiring additional riffs that continue to form and transform the boundaries of the discipline.

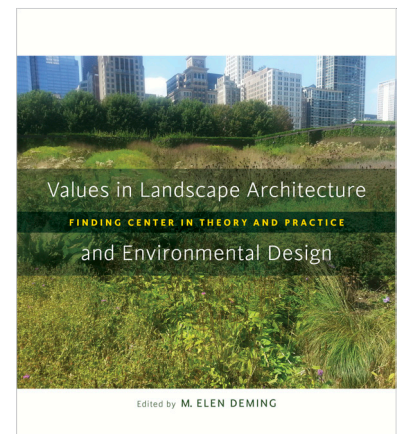
Part One: A ground within chaos

A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best he can. The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos. ... [The song] jumps from chaos to the beginnings of order in chaos and is in danger of breaking apart at any moment. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p 311)

A person from outside the discipline reading these three compilations might get the impression that the field of landscape architecture is chaotic. As landscape architecture draws from many different disciplines, it is challenging to describe the profession as a coherent whole. For example, Deming (2015b) highlights lessons from landscape studies, environmental humanities, environmental/ecological history, heritage and historic preservation, cultural materialism, semiotics, phenomenology, aesthetics, and place theory, participatory and place-based design. Girot and Imhof's *Thinking* contributors come from the disciplines of art history, architecture and sociology as well as landscape architecture.

In *The Declaration*, James Corner (2018) claims that one should think of '[t]he city as a garden' (p 68), while Charles Waldheim (2018) celebrates that landscape architecture identified itself with architecture over gardening. Alan M Berger (2018) voices a concern that landscape architects are stepping 'back fearfully in the name of artistic ... imperatives' (p 41) and that the field needs 'reopening ... to scientific thinking' (p 42), while Girot and Imhof (2017) claim that 'aesthetic concerns ... recently, have all too often been overshadowed by a positivistic scientific discourse about nature' (p 7). But within the chaos is a stabilising point, and I think *The Declaration* is inspirational in its simple focus on the landscape itself:

... humanity's common ground is the landscape itself. Food, water, oxygen – everything that sustains us comes from and returns to the landscape. What we do to our landscapes we ultimately do to ourselves. The profession charged with designing this common ground is landscape architecture (p xxii).



Although landscape remains a complicated term with multiple meanings,³ it provides the mark that centres each book and landscape architecture itself.

Part Two: Organising the territory

Now we are at home. But home does not preexist: it was necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space. ...

For sublime deeds like the foundation of a city or the fabrication of a golem, one draws a circle, or better yet walks in a circle as in a children's dance, combining rhythmic vowels and consonants that correspond to the interior forces of creation as to the differentiated parts of an organism. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p 311)

Kongjian Yu (2018) defines landscape as 'the medium where all natural, biological, and cultural processes interact' (p 54). Therefore, landscape architecture's ground of knowledge is situated between what Ian Thompson (2017) calls the 'three great empires of academia: the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the arts and humanities' (p 40).

To use Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) terminology, landscape architecture's territory is within the chaotic milieu between other disciplines. This in-betweenness can cause tensions between different disciplinary perspectives, as the quotes from Berger (2018) and Girot and Imhof (2017) above make evident; but, in general, the refrain that landscape architecture works across these empires repeats across all three books.

In his contribution to *The Declaration*, Mark Treib (2018) asks, 'Need we divide into separate camps those who stress the social, ecological, or aesthetic dimensions of landscape architecture considered only in isolation?' (pp 131–2). *The Declaration*, *Values* and *Thinking* all respond with a resounding, no. *The Declaration* claims, 'Landscape architects bring different and often competing interests together so as to give *artistic physical form* and *integrated function* to the ideals of equity, sustainability, resiliency, and democracy' (p xxiii, emphasis added). Kristina Hill (2017) concludes with the statement, 'The combined use of empirical and predictive science, memory, and strategy provides us with our design intelligence, in a context of compassion and humanism' (p 193). Deming (2015a) puts forward Elizabeth Meyer's work, especially 'The Post-Earth Day Conundrum' (2001), as an example of how the embrace of both art and science can 're-center' landscape architecture (p 229).

In *The Declaration*'s 'Private Practice Panel', Mark Johnson states, 'We must have our feet on the ground with our knowledge base that others do not fully share, just like we do not fully know and share theirs' (p 193). If landscape architecture's in-between position is where its knowledge base lies, then this in-betweenness needs more academic attention. Rather than fighting over territory within the discipline from the camps of science, art or social science, or blandly declaring that landscape architects are holistic thinkers, landscape architects can focus more on understanding and articulating how the design process works between these three master disciplines.

Treib (2018) might be calling for this knowledge when he asks, 'How does a grounding in the humanities as well as the sciences create a vision that contributes to more than mere environmental management?' (p 132). Girot and Imhof (2017) are looking for more clarity about the relationship between arts

and science through their volume, observing that, '[t]his mix of rational scientific discourse and poetic interpretation about landscape has never been so murky and inextricable as it is today' and claiming that '[p]laying critical attention to the way we conceive our environment, both symbolically and scientifically, may indeed help reconstitute a stronger vision and direction in landscape architecture' (p 8).

It is my impression that landscape architecture as a discipline is lacking in theory and research that critically examines how scientific, social and artistic forms of knowledge combine within the design process, where these disciplinary approaches may conflict and how designers can navigate those conflicts. For example, if '[f]rom a science-based perspective, it makes sense to see aesthetic experience as potentially instrumental, and ask whether aesthetic experiences can have effects on human cognition and behavior' (Hill, 2017, p 193), does it also make sense from the social or ethical perspective? When the public prefers an aesthetic that the designers consider 'counterfeit nature', do designers opt for the truth of the ecological narrative (as they perceive it) or the truth that emerges from public debate (Ahn and Keller, 2017, p 62)?

Some articles within these books provide useful examples of how design can navigate between these disciplinary empires. In particular, Kathryn Moore's (2015) 'The Value of Values' provides a philosophical way-out of the scientific versus artistic thought binary, suggesting that 'all thinking whether in the arts or the sciences, is ... interpretive and metaphorical; neither uses a special kind of reasoning' (p 61). Additionally, James Corner, Christophe Girot and Kathryn Gustafson's separate contributions to *Thinking* provide a trilogy of complementary techniques for site analysis and design. Each one covers a different set of design methods (layering of maps, 3D topology and tactile model making, respectively), and each provides compelling reasons for the choice. A review of these three essays in a studio could help students compare and debate these methods and develop their own hybrid approaches.

To conclude, landscape architecture's territory of specialised knowledge involves working between the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities in an applied manner through design. Fascinating insights into how landscape architects think and work can come from looking between science, art and social science, instead of arguing for the dominance of one over the others. These insights could be useful not only for landscape architecture practice but also as ways to better connect disciplines across academia as a whole.

Part Three: Venturing forth

Finally, one opens the circle a crack, opens it all the way, lets someone in, calls someone, or else goes out oneself, launches forth. ... One launches forth, hazards an improvisation. But to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it. One ventures from home on the thread of a tune. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p 311)

Across all three books, one more refrain resounds – a concern about the current and future conditions of the world. Each book suggests, in its own way, that this concern translates into a renewed call for landscape architecture. This concern was the premise for the original 1966 Declaration of Concern as well as the current New Landscape Declaration. One reason why landscape architects need to become more values-literate, according to Deming (2015a), is that 'the political

decision-making process surrounding environmental issues ... is likely to remain ideological and adversarial' (p 225). Girot and Imhof (2017) suggest that the 'massive environmental transformations to come' should be taken as 'an open invitation to reconsider landscape architecture's pivotal role in society' (p 11).

However, many of the forces at play – for example, in climate change, rapid urbanisation and global inequality – are outside landscape architecture's traditional domain. Weller (2018) reflects that '[t]he problem for the profession ... is that these pressures are shaping territory where landscape architecture has very little capacity' (p 9). Therefore, responding to these challenges requires not just a clear delineation of territory but also a venturing forth. Landscape architecture as a discipline cannot rely on its common ground or knowledge base to explain its value to society. The profession needs to draw trajectories, connections between landscape architecture and society.

One trajectory commonly suggested for valuing landscape architecture is to measure the value added to a place through design. Deming (2015a) describes this trajectory as 'the "prove it" paradigm [that] seeks to justify any and all investments ... Landscape services, from storm-water recharge rates to public perception and pride of place, are now increasingly being measured using both qualitative and quantitative measures' (p 230). The Landscape Performance Series from the Landscape Architecture Foundation exemplifies this type of trajectory.

Another common trajectory is to focus on design as the creation of meaningful places. Meaning is a value that often eludes measurement but motivates people in ways scientific measurement cannot. People act based on what gives them meaning; what they value. Authors in all three books make the case for designing with respect to the moods, meanings, memories, affects, narratives and myths that landscapes can create.⁴ Weller (2018) observes, 'As elemental as it is, the ecological crisis is also a crisis of meaning' (p 11). Girot and Imhof (2017) suggest that an appreciation of memory, myth and narrative be combined with the rational approach, in order to 'weave ... meaning' and 'entrust ... the common landscape good with a deeper sense of purpose' (p 10). Azzurra Cox (2018) summarises this trajectory well when she comments that 'we must be more than problem solvers. By crafting sensorially memorable experiences, we must help generate new modes of living and ask new questions' (p 165).

In addition to these two trajectories connecting landscape architecture to social value, I propose a third; one that, in some ways, combines the two described above but, in other ways, points in a slightly different direction. Simply put, landscape architecture can demonstrate its value in the world by creating places that people value. People value places for what they can do for them (instrumental value); they also value places that have meaning to them (poetic value). However, both these perspectives overlook the perspective that the value of a place is not just added or encoded; it is enacted.

The valuing of a landscape is a performative act, as in Judith Butler's (1999/1989) sense of the term (which is significantly different from the common use of 'performative' within landscape architecture and planning). Butler suggests that gender is not an identity grounded in an essence, but instead it comes from a performance: 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the

appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (pp 43–44). It might seem like a stretch, but I think that, similarly, the values found in landscapes are 'manufactured through a sustained set of acts' (ibid, p xv) rather than being simply added or encoded by the designers for the end users to consume. Therefore, if one is interested in the value of a landscape, one should pay attention to 'the mundane way' (ibid, p 180) in which people engage with a place. Value is built – constructed, questioned, cultivated and elaborated – through the acts of everyone who touches the place. These acts, when repeated over time, may congeal into core values, but they also might not.

Value is not only prescribed through a set of rubrics or inscribed through the poetic narrative of design. The values in a landscape (for a place always contains multiple values) are what emerges through the designs, the construction and the uses of a site. Therefore, value in a landscape is not only added in a mechanical process. For a design to add value, in addition to having 'a design agent ... apply[ing] a theory of value – that is a theory of goodness' (Deming, 2015b, p 13), it should involve an understanding of how people add value to a place through their own interactions with the place. The desired end value that informs a design might not necessarily be the values that people discover within a place post-construction.

The 'goodness' connected to landscape might not be anything one can describe in words; and it shifts through time and from person to person. The particular values of a place continue to shift, grow and, hopefully, multiply and expand long after the design has been constructed. For example, the value of a simple concrete walkway to a child with chalk in hand is different from its value to an elderly person wanting to cross the street. It has a different value again to the ecologist observing a plant in its cracks and to the artist observing the same plant. Leatherbarrow's (2017) review of Wang Yu's architecture reflects how a landscape post-design can continue to develop into a rich conglomeration of values and meaning:

When projects take up a conversation with preexisting conditions they generally succeed in making some of their points apparent; but in the course of the dialogue they also suffer some unexpected assertions, different forms of mismaintenance, over- or undergrowth, reuse that tends toward misuses, and so on. The labors of design and construction are not for that reason unsuccessful, for they survive in part, requalifying the location and freeing it into kinds of significance that could not have been realized anywhere, but are not defined by meanings assumed to exist only there. (p 206)

I believe that design should encourage the growth and co-existence of these values within a landscape; by doing so, landscape architecture can help create rich, vital places. The encouragement and support of multiple values is a slightly different form of poetics from the designer creating one collective narrative or encoded cultural meaning. The acknowledgement that people bring their own narratives, moods, memories and imaginations to the value of a place seems to be largely missing from the discourse in these three books. However, Kate Orff (2018) suggests that '[i]n the age of climate change, everyone is a landscape architect' (p 77),⁵ which I take to mean that everyone interacts with landscapes, making meaning, making places and making our shared world.

If this is the case, then the question becomes: how can a designer encourage people to value a specific place? Cox (2018) suggests that design can do so by 'evoking something simple yet radical: meaningful engagement with a place and

fellow citizens' (p 164). Rather than creating 'designed spaces that support the *perception* that humans are [courageous, resourceful and compassionate]' (Hill, 2017, p 193, emphasis added), perhaps landscape architects can create places that simply allow people to *be* courageous, resourceful and compassionate.

How can a design create value by supporting and celebrating individual memories, moods and aspirations? How can a designer facilitate such an open-ended process? Rather than understanding an *ethos* as a 'culturally standardized system of organization of the instincts and emotions of the individuals' (Bateson, cited in Meyer, 2015, p 37), perhaps we can start from Giorgio Agamben's (1993) proposition that *ethos* is 'the manner in which [one] passes from the common to the proper and from the common to the particular' (p 19).⁶ With this *ethos* in mind, designers would practise with an awareness of the responsibility that comes with designing for the common (one place or one society) in a manner that respects the proper and the particular (the multiple individuals acting in the place). This *ethos* is performed; it is particular, situated, contextual and ever-shifting. This *ethos* does not provide an easy answer or a set of ethical rules; all it points toward is a continual back and forth between proper and common, individual experiences and a collective place. I think Cox (2018) captures the spirit of this performative ethos in her statement:

Our task for this century is to craft those vessels of human experience and agency, to balance between the extreme specificity of a site and an openness of vision that welcomes a range of voices, subjectivities, and tensions. Designing space is a necessarily humanistic endeavor; it is messy. (p 165)

Landscape architects' ability to listen, which Tim Mollette-Parks (2018) emphasises, is an essential part of acting out this *ethos*.

The value of a landscape has no one centre or core except for the place itself, as a common yet complex ground. Design is only one act that values a place. Therefore, although designers can act with agency, they also need a sense of humility, an awareness that they are enacting alongside many others. This humility does not diminish the value of landscape architecture; to the contrary, I believe it can increase that value. As Gustafson (2017) encourages, 'You do not always have to do big things; you can do little things – things that will also change how somebody experiences and walks through a space' (p 161).

Designers still have agency but that agency is projective instead of determining. In Meyer's (2015) words, 'we set the world in motion. We chart out propensities without controlling outcomes. We design socio-ecological experiments in living with no promises. Something. Perhaps. It might. Who knows?' (p 49).

Conclusion

What is the potential value of landscape architecture to society? Although landscape architecture suffers from an interdisciplinarity that makes it hard to find a centre, it is also characterised by a shared understanding that the landscape itself is landscape architecture's common ground. Landscape architecture's territory of specialised knowledge is how we work between the sometimes conflicting disciplinary knowledge systems of the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities and art with applied outcomes. Much more can be done to

describe how these differing systems integrate in the design process in order to move beyond thinking of design ‘as a highly personal, mysterious act, almost like alchemy’ (Moore, 2015, p 59).

Landscape architecture can demonstrate its value to society simply by helping build places that people value. People value places for instrumental (utilitarian) and poetic (meaningful) reasons, but that does not mean the values in a place can be pre-determined through design. The values of landscapes reflect the ongoing interactions people have with places and the meanings they make out of them. These values often escape calculation and consensus. Value can be added to a landscape by design, but it is also added to a landscape by everyone who interacts with it. Refocusing landscape architecture practice to support and celebrate these interactions could result in a multiplication of landscape values.

The value of a designed landscape and therefore the value of landscape architecture do not come solely from proclamations, metrics or designed narratives but also – and more importantly – from a collection of how all individuals value a place. Acknowledging that values are multiple and open-ended positions landscape architecture on much less certain ground. Perhaps, like the values in a place, the ground of landscape architecture is performative. Rather than consisting of one unified, unchanging definition, the discipline of landscape architecture is made up of many overlapping lines where practitioners trace boundaries and take lines of flight. These three books trace over these lines, reinforcing some boundaries while launching forth across others.

NOTES

- 1 In addition to the three edited volumes reviewed in this article, see Herrington (2017) and Murphy (2016).
- 2 Alessandra Ponte’s article in *Thinking the Contemporary Landscape* (2017) made the initial connection between Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of territorialisation and the discipline of landscape architecture that inspired this reflection.
- 3 For interesting overviews on how landscape has been defined in different moments of history, see Deming (2015b), Scott (2017) and Leatherbarrow (2017).
- 4 Some of these authors are Cox (2018), di Palma (2017), Geuze (2017) and Meyer (2015).
- 5 Deming (2015b) also points out that ‘all of us are agents and shapers of landscape(s)’ (p 26).
- 6 Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call the musical ‘nome’ – the little tune we sing – *ethos* or Abode. Perhaps *ethos* is our tune, what we tell ourselves, how we make sense of our practice, as opposed to a fixed ethical rule.

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