

Viridiana: Plant Life and Landscape Aesthetics

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Overgrown: Practices between Landscape Architecture and Gardening,
Julian Raxworthy, Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2018,
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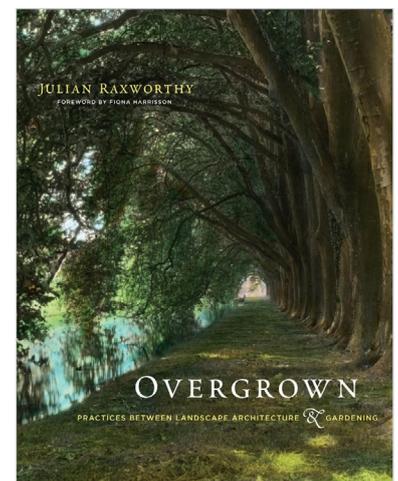
Julian Raxworthy's new book advances an intriguing, well-researched treatise about the design of gardens. I found that, like some old book of philosophy, it lays out not so much a thesis as a guide for living, a practice doctrine, a set of rules, the divinations of a magus. After reading it, I found myself rethinking the spells in my own personal witchcraft. My review of Raxworthy's book is a transcript of this rethinking operation. It, too, is about gardens.

Brutal, melancholy, ironic ... descriptions of gardens and landscapes are becoming more nuanced. A steadily growing interest in the aesthetics of landscape architecture is pushing garden design discourse to overcome its own constraints. New narratives are emerging (see, for example, the Call for Entries for Suburbia Transformed, which completely overhauls the idea of the suburban garden¹). For all its expanding internal literature and the rubber-necking from passing disciplines, however, landscape architecture rarely discusses aesthetic categories. One reason is that the profession has been in thrall to the categories Edmund Burke established in the eighteenth century: the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque.

Even though other aesthetic categories have come along in other aesthetic practices (the abject, for instance, in literature and photography), mostly landscape architects have contributed by rethinking the beautiful in the light of, for instance, environmental design (Meyer, 2008) or considering its subfields, for instance, melancholy (Bowring, 2018).² Another reason is that garden designers have always had clients. What we might call an aesthetic sociality prevails, and reception (feeling, talking and thinking about gardens) is always conservative because it evolves slowly. People expect designed landscapes to be in some way beautiful, or sublime, or picturesque, or all three. Garden design is influenced by this aesthetic sociality, which in turn is structured by the famous subject/object split that distances the human from the non-human and reverberates all through our encounters with art, with landscape, with the world ...

Novelty itself is framed within inherited aesthetic categories. The general model of attraction these days includes the slow, the fragile and the uncertain, descriptors that disclose the development of a greater complexity of reception. But it is still limited. Diverse creative practices from novels, to movies, to sculpture

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and poetry have elicited a broad spectrum of complex emotional responses.³ Movies can be emotionally compromising, or bitter, but designed gardens are generally required to be uplifting, or pretty, or calming – contemplative, at most. The possibility that a new aesthetic category might be developed for landscape architecture has rarely been mooted, but now someone has come along with just the thing. Or have they?

Julian Raxworthy has developed what he calls a ‘formal language’ of garden design. I think it is more like an aesthetic order, so let’s quickly conclude our discussion of that idea. You will recall that Burke introduced the concept of aesthetic categories with his definition of the beautiful (that which is well formed and pleasing) and the sublime (that which has the power to compel and destroy us).⁴ Kant found two more, the agreeable and the good, which were categories of rational judgement rather than aesthetic categories, but through these he was able to distinguish between ethical, sensory and subjective judgements. They all were very eighteenth-century determinations, bound up with eighteenth-century issues around wresting free will and moral law from Christianity and grounding human life in rational rather than religious codes. Art was thought of differently then, as was landscape.

As I have noted, what counts as aesthetic has changed somewhat since Edmund Burke’s categorisation. For instance, cultural theorist Sianne Ngai’s (2012) new categories are the zany, the cute and the interesting. The zany expresses the playfulness that is everywhere, particularly in items we buy or watch on the internet. It is to do with cultural production. The interesting is found mostly in discourse, where we develop our mutual interests but find these interests unfocused and somewhat boring. And the cute is bound up with consumption, where feelings of tenderness and aggression arise together at the same time in response to the same cultural stimuli. Ngai’s categories reflect minor, everyday experiences of shoes, hedgehogs and jokes, and yet force us to consider behaviour that is gendered, othering and demeaning as well.

I have discussed aesthetic sociality, the distribution of inherited codes and markers throughout aesthetic discourse. But this cannot occur without what sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2017) calls the twenty-first century ‘creativity *dispositive*’: the irradiation of all post-industrial, consumer culture with aesthetic capitalism. This affects the two issues we have been reviewing: the creative shaping of the individual’s subjectivity through its encounter with aesthetic conditions – an extreme reflexivity; and the modern figure of the creative act as producing something new, the production of permanent novelty.

Contemporary society is characterised by a striving for originality and uniqueness, in politics, in technology, in urbanism, in fashion, in literature, in business, in architecture and, yes, in landscape architecture too. We are to some extent ‘produced’ by this *dispositif*. In this world where everything is aestheticised, but where beauty is conflicted and sometimes irrelevant, and the terror of the sublime is rolled into the hyperobjects of climate change and mass extinction, what new aesthetic category can we turn to for its inside energy, its speakingness, its ability to refresh and reformulate our lives?

In *Overgrown: Practices between Landscape Architecture and Gardening*, Julian Raxworthy invites us to consider the viridic. This is his term, newly

minted, for that feeling of involvement with the world of plants. We sense the viridic when we enter a sunlight-filtering rainforest, or when we move through a garden that has a resolution achieved through the knowledgeable organisation of qualities that only very specific plants possess. This human–plant–world interaction unleashes ‘a fluid and indeterminate wave of energy’ that disrupts and overwhelms our senses, and engages us in plants’ biotic becoming. The viridic, Raxworthy writes in a manifesto at the end of his book, is a rejection of the split between the human body and the non-human world. What is more, the viridic is a unique language of landscape architecture. But, Raxworthy cautions, this language is on the verge of being lost. Landscape architecture has turned away from gardens and gardening, where the viridic is most clearly expressed, and become caught up in the technocratic delivery of performance-based outcomes as it battles engineering and architecture for the stewardship of planet Earth in the twenty-first century.

Raxworthy argues that gardening is at the heart of landscape architecture, and that it should be reinstated as a source of fructification of the discipline. To design gardens, however – and this is the rub – the designer must garden, that is, practise gardening. For the viridic is a non-representational endeavour. It is born from action, not drawing. The creative practice that produces the viridic (a combination, remember, of human and non-human drives) is the act of gardening in a landscape, not designing in an office. Moreover, without practising gardening you cannot practise garden design. To support this radical revisionism, Raxworthy lays out a theory of design, visits and presents six case studies, and establishes his manifesto, his *Guide for the Perplexed*. This book reclaims the garden as central to landscape architecture practice and discourse, reframing its role for the twenty-first century by demonstrating that gardening is an essential component of garden design, and placing human–plant interaction at the crux of landscape architecture.

Raxworthy is right to suggest that the project of the garden has been devalued in Anglo-American landscape architecture.⁵ Sometimes it is simply passed off as designing for rich folk, as in Billy Fleming’s recent ‘Design and the Green New Deal’ (2019), where landscape architects are scolded for designing gardens rather than saving the world. We often forget that for 5,000 years the aesthetic language of landscape architecture developed in a wide array of privately owned and civically operated gardens. Without gardens, there would be no landscape architecture, despite those who think the discipline sprang fully formed from the brow of Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted inherited, rather than invented, the aesthetic language of landscape architecture – and it is continuing to evolve. If probed about Olmsted’s influence, the majority of environmental designers practising around the globe today would probably ask, Who is that? Criticising landscape architects for making gardens is a little like criticising muralists for making easel paintings, or journalists for making novels.

This is why Raxworthy’s book has a manifesto. A statement of belief. And like those ancient formulations of the good life, it has a system behind it – a philosophy, if you like. I wish to comment on two components of Raxworthy’s philosophy that are circulating prominently through landscape architecture today. The first is the turn to embodied performance (as opposed to representational design),

and the second is the problem of anthropocentrism. In making this comment, I am effecting a 'conscious uncoupling' of garden practice from the spatially and socially bounded territoriality with which it is usually associated. I suggest that conversations about gardens in landscape architecture must drift over the wall and into our shared social realm, so that – for instance – Raxworthy's insights can have wider influence. I will also demonstrate why aesthetic practices developed in garden design and production are critical for landscape architecture in general.

One of the reasons garden design is seen as irrelevant is that landscape architecture has developed a social agenda that focuses on public and civic terrains. A socially engaged, or participatory, landscape architecture works with cities and communities to produce metropolitan social and physical infrastructures that develop power relations and enhance the agency of local collectives. Compared with this mission, gardens seem *infra dig*.

Raxworthy shows how participation not only is critical in the design of gardens – that the designer must dig, sow, prune and harvest – but also overcomes the ontological divide by distributing agency throughout the garden network. Gardeners, for Raxworthy, enter the world of plants actively and as an equal. Landscape architecture decision-making and judgement, he states, 'should be exercised on the basis of physical involvement in the landscape being developed' (p 331). Both garden and gardener are shaped reflexively through their interactions.

Gardens, then, are sites of contestation. Raxworthy sees the designer as doing battle with vast forces, just as transforming civic institutions requires engaging with competing constituencies in fraught situations that are always contingent and open-ended – and could always be otherwise. Inevitably, it will come to a point where a threshold has to be crossed (the branch will be lopped off, the pest will eat the bud) and this moment will reflect the power relations inherent in the situation.

The engaged garden designer, like the engaged landscape architect, assists human and non-human collectives in their struggle to produce territory that is truly communal. In this way, participation brings the practitioner closer to the problems of life itself. Work that is truly engaged admits no shadow. The essential principle for that old activist designer William Morris was that the design and the execution should never be separated, no more than they were in the Middle Ages, his dreamtime.⁶ I think this is part of Raxworthy's point. And it is the promise of participation: the thinking, the doing and the making are all one, and they are carried out in a space to which everyone has access and to which everyone can contribute.⁷

This brings us to the second of my two thought-cycles. It has been 30 years since Bruno Latour (1987) began to study the practices and behaviours of scientists. His examination of what scientists actually do led to actor network theory (ANT), which casts the wide framework of society as an indivisible network through which elements circulate, rather than a discourse divided into fact (science) and value (society), with the two never merging. I do not think any other discipline or profession is more in need of ANT than landscape architecture, given it deals with humans and non-humans alike.

Raxworthy recognises this when he states that humans and plants are entangled equally – and ‘intersubjectively’ – in garden processes. As we have seen, he argues that gardeners are involved in the shaping of plants, and through this involvement are themselves shaped – ‘the viridic is inherently recursive and iterative’. Gardeners learn by observation of the effects of their previous actions. Latour has painstakingly described the passage of objects and processes through the networks of social exchange as inherently political. Science and politics are deeply imbricated and it is useless to try to describe what, say, botanists or ecologists do, separately from the social regimes in which their work is made possible. In the same way, the practice of gardening, in which the gardener bends plant growth – evolutionary, biological – through material actions that physically shape the plant ‘for aesthetic outcomes’, is a creative act that involves political agency in this production of new ‘things’.

Why political? Precisely because of the intersubjectivity, the co-creation, the wilful, reflexive tyranny. Plants, as all botanists and surely all landscape architects know, cannot be reduced to simple, individual objects. They are connected, like humans, by the soil biome for a start, and through the physical and social ecosystems they co-create. We could describe them aptly as vascular unfoldings, that draw and are drawn into assemblages with humans and other non-humans. Or, alluding to the *new vitalism*, as cross-order associations (and the various modes of becoming that comprise these) that interact materially and aesthetically (see Bennett, 2010; Connolly, 2011; Shaviro, 2014).

Not only are plants agentic; they are also radically open to disruption and can change their trajectories even as they remain true to their origins in material and energetic thinghood. In this respect, they are like us. Humans and plants have a continuity. We affect each other. Thus agency is distributed throughout the heterogeneous assemblage of organisms that comprises the garden; it is not restricted solely to human bodies or human collectives. With a nod to the recent *geological turn*, we may wish not to restrict agency to flora and fauna, but to include minerals and liquids in the realm of vital, dynamic operations (Bonneuil, 2015; Cohen, 2015), but this step is beyond Raxworthy’s scope.

While recent overlaps between consciousness theory, systems theory and biophysics suggest that plants are more like modern humans than modern humans have imagined, their political agency has not yet gained them acceptance into the republic of beings as imagined by most Anglo-Americans (Grusin, 2015). Like most people, landscape architects put plants on the other side of the divide. Of course, plants are part of a world that is occupied by humans but they are not dependent on humans and can continue without them. While connected, they are also remote. In most respects, they are not like us. But their political agency consists, exactly, of asserting and projecting non-human action within the public ecosystems of planetary life.

The contribution plants make to public culture is often related to their instrumental provision of proteins and vitamins, carbon reduction and phytoremediation. Raxworthy’s theory of the viridic explains how their aesthetic modes influence global ethics and politics as much as their biophysical modes, as much as the visual and tactile entanglements of art – as much, even, as words, arguments and reasons collected in social or literary manifestos.

Further, these modes are multiple. Of course, plants achieve their efficacy and causality for humans through the human sensorium, but our perception of them is complicated. They seem to operate within the human imaginary as part of a taken-for-granted configuration, or *habitus*, that organises and stimulates human feelings about the world. Plants illuminate the human world by affecting us in specific ways, both bodily and conceptually, but they also regulate it through their continuity with processes that contribute to planetary capacity and the resilience of Earth systems.

Despite the aloofness of plants, they share with human life a co-evolutionary, co-dependent, reflexive inter-animation. Vegetal and anthroid (to coin a term) bodies can differently realise in ways that are conjoint and therefore political (because public and collective). Plants and humans form a kind of polity, then, within the larger biospheric community, a polity that subsumes the oh-so-human ordering of species. Well, this is the thinking anyway (Latour, 1987; Protevi, 2009). To consider plants as having aesthetic agency is to suggest that the conjoint action of plants and humans is not under the control of a rational plan or intention. The field of political action is like a self-organising ecology, in which plants and humans are equally actants, sources of transformation.

How does the rehearsal of representation (epistemology) and human–non-human interaction (ontology) that I have outlined above enable us to rethink the viridic as an aesthetic category, and why is this useful? I believe it eschews value judgements about what plants could or should do or be. Plant attributes are not seen as having ‘qualities’ for humans to rearrange. Texture, Raxworthy writes, ‘emerges as a characteristic with ecological or physical rationales in relation to growth, such as avoiding transpiration or predation’ (p 325). Colour can be understood as a register of time that has nothing to do with the colour wheel or human habits of association. Plants are no longer bundles of attributes; even less are they objects to our subjects. Their subjectivities are co-created, as are ours. Also, when humans and plants are equals, a plant’s trajectory is its own affair.

The rationalism and individualism that drive landscape architectural design occlude the political structures (the speciesism) that enable and configure it in the first place. When humans and plants have equal rights, any plant’s biological destiny is a matter of negotiation. The idea of the viridic (‘when we look at plants, we don’t know what is going on’) makes possible a rapprochement in which humans, rather than bending plants to their will, work with plants to create a new human–plant-world assemblage in which plants are not reduced to manipulable qualities. This implies a pluralism – a pluralist democracy – in which plants, people and other organisms develop a collective, conjoint social life that recognises the we and the they, but does not use these to impose an aesthetic or political hegemony on the organisms that enable humans to live. The viridic, Raxworthy avers, is a learning practice. As a new, relational aesthetic category, the viridic denotes an ongoing agonistic configuration of power relations that achieves no finality, only further negotiation.

Raxworthy rails against landscape urbanism, but landscape urbanism was necessary for the development of landscape architecture, as it helped us understand and formulate the operation of the political within the institutional complex of the profession. Ultimately, it has generated the viridic as an aesthetic

category that enables landscape architects to engage and re-imagine the political. Landscape urbanism has focused us on important social processes, particularly the production, circulation and reception of landscapes, and it helps us see why the garden is not an unsullied autonomous realm but, just like all the others, a powerful political terrain.

The ‘invention’ of the viridic is not a purification of planting design, then, but a recontamination of garden practice by a politicised aesthetic. The garden emerges from Raxworthy’s discussion as a collection of social practices and conventions in which consumers, corporations, academics and scientists participate. Now we can see it as a structural model of the social – an aesthetic sociality – a unique actor network with its own actants and relations; these actants are all the organisms (especially the plants?) that construct the garden.

The idea of the viridic, with its flattened ontology and the imbrication of the designer in the process of plant growth – not as an autonomous and dictatorial tyrant, but as an equal co-evolutionary participant – enables us to see gardens as a part of a landscape-empowered social process that produces sensuous, symbolic and emotional stimuli for an audience. It moves us away from the figure of the gardener as wielding aesthetic hegemony, based on a tradition of purified forms of aesthetic appreciation (colour, texture, form, space, growth). The gardener is no longer a shepherd. That old custodial regime implies human exceptionalism. The viridic places humans within an order that does not distinguish between organisms on the basis of categories that are important only to humans.

The inward-looking aesthetic sociality of the garden was oriented towards bourgeois tastes and ideals of beauty that it organised and perpetuated in relatively fixed historical and regional formats (the formats that Raxworthy wishes his case studies to break down). But Raxworthy has to be careful that gardeners (whom he venerates) do not emerge from their interaction with the viridic with their despotic and legislative tendencies intact. The promise of the viridic is that the garden is reformulated not as a closed aesthetic system, but as an open one with social and physical, ontological and epistemological borders that are continually reassessed and redissolved for the sake of inclusion and expansion.

Although he never states it and his comments about aesthetics are slight, focusing on ‘the look of a plant’, Raxworthy has, I think, developed a theory of aesthetics in landscape architecture. But his notion of the viridic needs to be contextualised within a more comprehensive theoretical framework that both resets the role of representation in design and accounts for the human–non-human agency of the material collective.

As the discipline of landscape architecture tries to shake off traditional aesthetic attachments to, for instance, good taste, the line of beauty, positive affect and the notion of the garden as an autonomous sphere of experience, it is important to consider the relationship between the idea of participatory design and the overcoming of the human–non-human binary. Aesthetic categories structure human involvement with the world. This is why the aesthetic is political. In our age of androcentric environmental destruction, facilitated in no little way by a hubris reinforced through distancing strategies, a landscape architecture aesthetic that pulls humans into the mix by overcoming representation–embodiment and human–non-human structures of relation has got to be a step forward.

NOTES

- 1 <http://jamesrosecenter.org/exhibitions/suburbia-transformed>.
- 2 The literary field of ecocriticism has created a resonant vocabulary of the beautiful, through reformulations of canonical works in the light of the environmental humanities.
- 3 Film noir is often cited as an emotionally complex film genre. See Barnett (2008).
- 4 Just in case you are wondering, even the so-called technological sublime is not crafted – that is part of the point of this category.
- 5 He identifies a landscape architecture or garden design tradition in Europe, however.
- 6 See Houellebecq (2012) for a graceful but unstinting examination of this principle in the contemporary art world.
- 7 For useful discussions of participation in arts practices, see Bishop (2012) and Thompson (2015).

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