Landscapes are not Lemon-squeezers: Shared Design Myths

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INTRODUCTION

AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND UNIVERSITIES offer ten programmes[1] in landscape architecture, five of which are in multidisciplinary schools that include industrial design.[2] Recently, *Landscape Australia* published 'Windows of Opportunity' (2003), profiling each Australian landscape architecture programme, and three of the four programmes that exist in common with industrial design specifically mention some relationship to that programme: as a minor (QUT), or interdisciplinary course option (UC and UNSW). This paper discusses four points of difference between the two disciplines that highlight difficulties in combining an object-oriented discipline with a context-oriented one, and looks at a new programme in New Zealand as an illustration of the impact of these differences.

Dianne Firth, in her article tracing the development of the programme at the University of Canberra (Firth, 2000), records the school's philosophy at the time of its founding:

> [A]ll man-made objects are seen as posing one related design problem, differing only in scale and context. These differences in scale and context are seen as marginal to the fundamental similarities of the problem-solving aspects of a common approach to design.

The rationale for housing landscape architecture and industrial design programmes in one school appears to be based on this idea that design is an activity common to both disciplines. This can mistakenly lead to assumptions of shared theories, values, methods, materials, and histories. Closer examination of each discipline's approach reveals important differences in philosophies, and suggests that the assumption of design as a common activity is misleading and ultimately unhelpful to both disciplines.

While design is a difficult activity to define, its focus, purposes and techniques can be described. Four areas in which there is a marked difference between industrial design and landscape architecture are: professionalism; focus on internationalism; object orientation and the role of precision technology.

1. PROFESSIONALISM

Landscape architecture is a profession, while industrial design is not, although it may be attempting to establish itself as one.[3] Characteristics of professions are difficult to define categorically (see, for example, Schein and Kommers, 1972), but two criteria distinguish landscape architects from industrial designers and thus influence approaches to education. First, a professional provides a

service based on the 'objective' need of the client. The landscape architect must offer a 'detached diagnosis' of the client's needs, in addition to the client's requests. Professionalism requires that the landscape architect should serve not just the client's wishes but also those of a wider group (who may not be clients) and, importantly, its 'silent client', the landscape itself. The landscape architect has an obligation to protect the interests of this 'silent client', spelt out in the code of ethics of the professional organisation. In contrast, there is no formal requirement on the part of an industrial designer to meet the needs of anyone other than the commissioning client, and while others (such as purchasers) are almost always considered, there is no professional obligation on the part of the designer to establish or meet other needs.[4]

The second criterion that distinguishes landscape architects from industrial designers is the autonomy of the professional body, which regulates admission to itself through, among other things, the accreditation of education programmes to ensure a common body of essential knowledge and skills. The distinction between a profession and a non-profession lies not in the commonality of programme content (arguably industrial design programmes are equally similar to one another) but in what motivates the commonality: a professional body seeking to ensure suitably qualified practitioners, or a strategy aimed at satisfying market demand.

2. INTERNATIONALISM

The industrial design programmes mentioned repeatedly declare their orientation towards the international arena, desirable for its larger markets and greater exposure for a designer's work. Comparison with, and emulation of, other countries is common. In New Zealand, Finland is cited as "the benchmark of international best practice" (Smythe, 2003), partly because it has a similar-sized population but has succeeded, where New Zealand has not, in developing a strong design culture, and a worldwide demand for its high-quality products. Orientation towards international markets requires design that is culturally transferable, and this may militate against identifying the specific and particular within the local culture.

Conversely, landscape architecture is almost exclusively oriented towards the specific and the particular. There is justified suspicion of the transference of a design strategy from one 'site' to another, let alone across cultures. As Elizabeth Meyer writes, "We should be suspect of generalizations that 'transcend the boundaries of culture and region'... Grounding in the immediate, the particular and the circumstantial – the attributes of situational criticism – is an essential characteristic of landscape architectural design and theory" (Meyer, 1997).

3. OBJECT ORIENTATION

Objects have discrete, apprehensible boundaries. Industrial design addresses the boundary by using strategies to identify it more clearly, for example, by protecting the foot in a ski boot that separates snow from skin, or by separating the

electronics of a remote control from the buttons and casing that our hand contacts. A defined boundary frees an object from its context and allows it to be moved from place to place independently of its context.

Such clear definition of boundaries is almost entirely absent in landscape architecture, where, the boundary is frequently artificial in some way (for example, a property line that bears no relation to landform or water movement), and effort is made to dissolve it. Landscape architects transgress boundaries in order to connect a site to its landscape, on a visual level (to a distant view), and on a systems level (for example, continuity of vegetation cover). Meyer argues that landscape architecture "is concerned with the relationships between things, not the things themselves" (p 66). In other words, landscape is context dependent and context oriented, not object oriented. Industrial design approaches that emphasise establishing and defining boundaries of objects counteract the need for the landscape architect to connect across and diffuse boundaries.

4. PRECISION TECHNOLOGY

Industrial design requires technologies of fine control and exact reproduction. It needs technologies that can describe a surface, element, or product accurately, and reproduce it flawlessly. Computer programmes such as CAD/CAM give the industrial designer a very high level of control over the conditions of manufacture and the finished product. Sizes, shapes, forms, edges and colours can be achieved exactly, so the designer is required to specify these parameters to the level of precision demanded by the technology.

Landscape architects must use these same technologies in conditions of uncertainty, high variability, and change. Technologies such as GIS mapping demand exact definitions of spatial and temporal boundaries, definitions that are frequently unknown or unknowable. These precision-reliant technologies ask the landscape architect to exert a degree of control over a site that is artificial, at times arbitrary, and frequently antithetical to its application. Rather than working with the uncertainty inherent in natural systems, the landscape architect is forced to eliminate the uncertainty because the technology demands it.

DISCUSSION

When Victoria University of Wellington's programme in landscape architecture was started in 2001, it was established in a School of Design that was already strongly oriented towards object-based design. It was assumed that landscape architecture would benefit from a more object-based design approach in order to produce strongly formalist design outcomes. Arising largely out of a lack of awareness of the context-orientation of landscape architecture, this model of design education has failed to validate process and systems thinking essential for landscape architecture. By emphasising product and object representation, such as finely crafted models suitable for public display, students respond to the materials of the model and not of the

site. They fail to come to terms with the landscape itself and instead design the model. Landscape theorist Elizabeth Meyer observed that, "landscape does not sit silent awaiting the arrival of an architectural subject", but in an object-driven design culture this approach becomes unavoidable.

These four points of difference between the two disciplines illustrate that the activity and purpose of design in landscape architecture and industrial design are very different in emphasis and process. If the assumption that 'design is design' is accepted uncritically, methods and approaches borrowed from one discipline may prove irrelevant and even damaging to the development of each discipline. The triad of 'homogenisation, internationalism, and functionalism' that Peter Jacobs (1991) identified may be exactly what industrial design needs, but it is the same triad that he claimed was undermining meaningful, site-specific design in landscape architecture. Educational compatibility of the disciplines may depend more on the recognition of difference than on attempts to realign landscape architecture with 'related' design disciplines.

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NOTES

[1] Because every university uses different language for an academic unit (school, college, faculty and so on) I use the term 'school' to refer to the main administrative group in charge of a programme, and '"programme' for the typical four-year curriculum leading to the degree.

[2] Four are in Australia: Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT); University of Canberra (UC); University of New South Wales (UNSW); and Queensland University of Technology (QUT); one is in New Zealand: Victoria University of Wellington (VUW).

[3] See, for example, QUT's website <http://www.dbe.bee.qut.edu.au/about/>.

[4] This is not to suggest that the industrial designer ignores the needs of the end user. It is simply stating that there is no 'obligation' for the designer to do so. A designer is free to produce, at a client's request, completely useless, unnecessary and even environmentally damaging products.