

# Writing Gardens – Gardening Drawings: Fung, Brunier and Gardening as a Model of Landscape Architectural Practice

JULIAN RAXWORTHY

*Julian Raxworthy, School of  
Geography, Planning and Architecture,  
University of Queensland,  
Brisbane, Australia.  
Email: j.raxworthy@uq.edu.au*

Landscape architecture is different from other design discourses, notably architecture, because of its utilisation of 'dynamic' construction media such as plant materials, soils and water, compared with the 'static' materials of architecture, colloquially described as bricks and mortar. This dynamism refers to the fact that landscape materials not only change, but get better over time.

While this is a material difference, its implications extend to practice, which has been modelled, from architecture, to favour a static mode of representation: the drawing. While the drawing is important for the propositional nature of landscape architecture, it may be valuable to look at other disciplines, allied to landscape architecture, which might be seen as better able to engage with change.

In this essay, the garden provides just such an example. In the writings of Stanislaus Fung on the Chinese garden text the Yuan yi, an argument is made about writing being a fundamental act in the endeavour of gardening that may offer a bridge across the 'ontological disparity' that exists between representation and the subject, the landscape. To speak of writing in this context suggests that writing about gardens is actually a type of gardening in itself. This argument is extended in the current essay quickly to see if it is also appropriate to consider drawings in this way.

This essay also attempts to legitimate theoretically the real possibility of modifying landscape architectural practices to engage with change, by suggesting what might be learned from gardening. In further research by this author, this argument will be used as the theoretical basis for critiquing gardens in such a way that lessons learnt from garden designers can be valuably incorporated back into the discourse of landscape architecture.

## KEY WORDS

*Landscape architecture  
Change  
Gardening Writing  
Representation  
Maintenance*

## INTRODUCTION

IT IS IMPORTANT for the discipline of landscape architecture to begin to be empowered by, and to exploit its inherent character as a discipline. To do this it must begin to examine the important chains that tie it to other disciplines – notably architecture, the one it is tied to most closely through its practices. Practices are important because of all the ways we might define a discipline, it is their methodologies and ways of working (doing what they do) that have the most systemic importance.

The often cited 'material' difference between landscape architecture and architecture, of dynamic materials (such as plants, soil and water) versus static materials (such as bricks and mortar) fails to recognise that the key difference is one of time, which is clearly not a material. Designing with plants involves designing in this context – one in which change and time must feature prominently. When thought of as a design act, landscape architecture has an

opportunity to explore time in a way that is unique to the discipline. This, however, is difficult, because the way in which landscape architects work has been modelled on that of architecture. However, to simply reject architecture would be an act that also reduced landscape architecture's ability to participate in the process of design.

## PRACTICES

Clearly, the architectural sense of form and proposition is one that is valuable to landscape architecture; however, it may be that in its current practice, landscape architecture is too architectural to allow it to exploit its real differences. The practices in question are those that force static propositions, which can include both hard, unchangeable, inflexible designs, and designs in which time is allowed for simply as an extrusion or an erosion of the initial static condition. This type of practice is one that is linked closely to the representation of drawings, modelled on an objective, built reality. But, to concentrate on the drawing as the source of issue, is again to take a materialistic view: the piece of paper, or lines of the drawing itself, cannot simply be the problem, and so to focus academic enquiry on representation is a trap. If we look at drawing, for example, we should rather be examining what it is to draw, while remaining open to useful pragmatic insights on techniques received along the way.

Correspondingly, this essay looks to another link to define landscape architecture in disciplinary terms, namely 'the garden'. The garden is important to landscape architecture for a range of reasons, not the least of which is that its most basic activity is the design of gardens, and correspondingly its history and form language originally come from an examination of that activity. The inheritance of an architectural practice from Olmstead in the nineteenth century defined landscape architecture distinctly from garden design, yet still requiring the garden foundation despite the craft of gardening being rejected in favour of the professionalism of architecture. In considering modifications to landscape architecture that allow it to engage with change, gardening as an activity may be a useful and relevant exemplar. Conversely, with an eye on practice, it would be interesting to consider gardening operations as design acts. To do so, however, representations in some static, or at least compressed, form must inevitably be included. Could that static form be writing?

The difference between the time of building and the time of planning, is one of the key differences that makes landscape architecture a profession rather than a trade, and it is in its use of a represented or virtual project that its ability to propose is tied. In looking to gardening for alternative modes of practice, we are also looking inevitably at either totally different types of representations, or at modifications to conventional representational practices on the basis of something we can learn from gardening. Paradoxically, the things we must learn from gardening, in the context of this argument concern practices in gardening that engage with form over time, practices constituting precisely those things that

take the time and so make gardening a trade rather than a profession. These things are verbs, 'doing' activities: planting, maintenance, senescence, replanting, pruning and shaping. These are effectively the maintenance acts of gardening, the response to changes in the garden that occur over time. The gardener is present to both observe and respond to the changes. In looking to gardening as a type of 'doing', it may be worth examining representation in gardening, and then somehow merging this with landscape architectural representation. Such a possibility of hybridity between the fixity of the professional versus the flow of the trade is suggested in the writing of Stanislaus Fung, in his essay "Mutuality and the Cultures of Landscape Architecture". In it he discusses *shi*, the Chinese notion of propensity, which he characterises as "oscillating between the static and the dynamic points of view; in any given configuration there is an inherent propensity for the unfolding of events".<sup>1</sup> In his further writing about the *Yuan ye*, the seventeenth-century Chinese gardening treatise by Ji Cheng, Fung could be seen to suggest that writing itself is a gardening act, complicit with the production of the garden, suggesting another representational mode that exists somewhere between the speed of the office and the drudge in the garden.

## WRITING THE GARDEN INTO BEING

Writing is obviously important to gardening: one has only to look at the size of the gardening section in most bookshops, now full of philosophic garden diaries about intelligent gardens by passionate enthusiasts. These amateurs immediately see the wonder of the activity of gardens, and judge a flowing experiential form, text, as the most sophisticated way of describing it. Audiences are clearly interested in being armchair gardeners if we review the number of reality television shows that demonstrate to the viewer how easy it is to make one's own garden. In these shows, the time of maintenance and change does not seem to exist, just a smooth ease of pleasant pre-fabricated activity, with a beautiful final result.

Fung proposes, with the treatise as evidence, a critical practice of design that is as philosophic as it is practical, that is as hypothetical as it is real, and one that can exist in a range of media with equal strength.<sup>2</sup> Fung writes:

... the absence of an ontological disparity between reality and appearance, Chinese words, as articulations of images, do not identify and describe an independent reality, but inscribe it and participate in it ... It is only by following the inscription, the words, the path, that one comes to know the world ... The figuration of gardens which is itself of one body with the figuration of the world.<sup>3</sup>

The ontological disparity that is implied above, is effectively the distancing mechanism of representation: separating the designer from a real, imaginative engagement with the subject – the landscape. In the Chinese model that Fung extrapolates, the writing as well as the reading form a part of the garden activity: they are gardening. While obviously a virtual rather than physical participation, the garden reader and writer (who become interchangeable), despite our professional assertions, is working in a way that is not too different from that of drawing a

design that will later be built. This is also not too different from the model of antiquarian association put forward by Edward Harwood in relation to the Picturesque,<sup>4</sup> except that the associations are not allegorically didactic because they are practical and experiential. This 'ontological disparity' is also one of theory and practice, dissolved by both the scholarly and practical acceptance of writing within the trade of gardening. If one considers that this view suggests an involvement of writing with gardening, can landscape architecture also open up its conventional medium in the same way? This essay will conclude with a brief examination of drawing, as another form of gardening practice, according to the model put forward by Fung, and examined through the example of Yves Brunier and his dizzy collages and rich assemblages.

## GARDENING DRAWINGS

The above argument offers the landscape architect the opportunity to garden drawings, in a way that isn't simply an analogy (like the Picturesque), but an active engagement with the landscape in a different, though no less participatory sense. To garden is to convince, to cajole plants, surfaces, the weather, into coming close to what one might envision they may be. This must be based on some real trends, however, because a fundamental misjudgement about the 'temperament' and 'nature' of the garden can lead to failure or, worse these days, extensive maintenance of artificiality to allow it to perform. This implies a space of trends, predictions and odds, where a correct sense of the design is more important than obvious concrete resemblance, the feel more important than thing itself. This type of 'accuracy' is spoken about in relation to French landscape architect Yves Brunier by Petra Blaisse, with whom he collaborated on Museum Park, in Rotterdam, and who later went on to realise its construction, after Brunier's death in 1994:

They[Brunier's representations] were not necessarily correct in substance, but in sensation, color, light, feeling, atmosphere. More than architecture, landscape architecture is a prediction. Whereas architecture describes a stable state, landscape architecture triggers literally endless scenarios of life and death, rebirth, transformation, mutation.<sup>5</sup>

In many respects, this view of the drawings of Brunier conforms to an argument regarding the involvement of craft in the 'making' of drawings. However, taking such a view would be to focus on the materialism of the drawing rather than its content: the making of drawn marks seems to Brunier to be some form of analogous toil, to suggest, perhaps, that to draw is to wield a mattock. To draw is to cultivate, to activate ancient techniques of farming and gardening, on paper, as one would on the land.

## CONCLUSION

This conception of the role of writing, reading and text clearly relates to the role and representational media of planning to landscape architecture. If one thinks of the innumerable documents such as 'Plans of Management' and 'Environmental

Management Plans' that form an important part of landscape architectural practice, the necessity to evolve the use of text and documents to be part of a design palette seems a priority. This is a valuable area for further discussion, and will be investigated by this author in future work. For the purposes of this essay, however, the establishment of a theoretical bridge for landscape architecture to adopt practices from its constituent disciplines, in order to inform a practice that is better able to exploit the characteristics of change, has been the most important assertion.

This argument was then extended to test it against a conventional drawn practice, quickly, using Brunier as an example. An in-depth investigation of the concrete ways in which Brunier interpreted and interacted with a particular site and drawing, as well as the specific tools to do so, is another study that deserves investigation (and will be), to begin finally to develop a rigorous hybrid practice that is more simultaneous with the change of the landscape than it is simulating, releasing landscape architecture from some of its current static practices.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Fung, S (1998) Mutuality and the Cultures of Landscape Architecture, in Corner, J (ed) *Recovering Landscape*, Sparks, NV: Princeton Architectural Press.
- <sup>2</sup> One has only to view the visual literacy in landscape awakened in the Australian population by generations (now) of wilderness photography.
- <sup>3</sup> Fung, S (1998) The interdisciplinary prospects of reading Yuan ye, *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, p 213.
- <sup>4</sup> Harwood, ES (1993) Personal Identity and the Eighteenth Century Landscape Garden, *Journal of Garden History*, 13 (1&2).
- <sup>5</sup> Blaisse, P (1996) A personal (sic) impression, *Yves Brunier: Paysagiste*, Basel, Birkhauser: M Jacques, p 21.