

Making History: Writing & Designing Landscape

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HISTORY IS MADE and re-made by both real 'material' events and the human interpretations through which they are en-framed, understood and reported. The formal and informal censoring of history by states, politicians, authors and even disciplines exemplifies how 'truths' are frequently manipulated to create a desired version of the world. These constructed histories serve as the received reality in which many people live their lives. One of the roles of landscape historians, artists and critics is to challenge the 'taken for granted' history of place and people.

The re-writing of histories and the omissions and re-framing of past events need not be the product of malevolent intent. History and the incorporation of historical understanding within design is partly a creative exercise, as contemporary theorists and designers such as Bernard Lassus have shown. Post-structuralism has brought about a profound rethinking of the nature of history, and the recognition of the existence of multiple histories. Friedrich Nietzsche destabilised ideals of monolithic histories, challenging the idea of history as a recounting of 'real' events. Instead, he conceptualised a history of discourse, a perspective that became central to the post-structural paradigm. This shift in perspective was expressed in the emergence of a linguistic turn in fields such as history and art history, exploring history as pluralistic and language-like, rather than linear and scientific. History becomes as much about voicing questions as finding answers. This reorientation is most effectively demonstrated in the work of Michel Foucault, who examined the ways in which disciplines are constructed through the naturalising of their own historical 'truths'. In a discipline such as landscape architecture, therefore, the discourses, together with inbuilt belief systems and 'myths', become a defining factor in the sense of an identity. Landscape histories and their discourses are also part of the identity for nations and regions, adding to the complexities outlined in the papers in this issue.

The recent rethinking of the nature of history has been reflected in the recognition of a range of legitimate 'other' viewpoints, and a consequent shift in the kinds of histories that are 'admitted', such as historical studies of intimate worlds, rather than the vision of grand narratives. Histories have become challenges to hierarchies and hegemonies, recognising repressed cultures and subcultures, raising the significance of formerly invisible histories. The dissolution of boundaries between disciplines has also opened up new possibilities in the crafting of histories, with the migration of theoretical perspectives from their former habitats, bringing together hitherto unrelated threads to form new understandings.

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The first paper in this issue is both a product of, and a challenge to, this new culture of history. Andrea Gaynor and Ian McLean identify the potential for an 'ecological art history', exploring the possibilities for the disciplines of art history and environmental history to be woven into a compelling new thread. Such a hybridisation reflects the pluralistic character of contemporary knowledge and the possibilities for fusion that occur within diagonal groupings of things. These are what Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky called the 'knight's move' in linking together things that are not linearly connected. Gaynor and McLean observe that there have been points of connection between the two disciplines, where histories of art allude to the biological origins of art, and some environmental histories may have used artworks as illustrations of particular instances, yet a coherent environmental art history remains unformed.

However, at the same time that post-structural pluralism opens up such possibilities, Gaynor and McLean are also cautious about what has been lost during the deconstruction of nature and culture. Paralleling the shifts in history towards plural perspectives, challenges in science have advocated recognition of the spaces between categories. Surrealist sociologist Roger Caillois, for example, proposed a 'diagonal science' which challenges orthodox science's need for rigid classification, and instead embraced the fruitful encounters that happen at the edges of categories. Gaston Bachelard also challenged the immutable nature of the epistemology of knowledge, particularly within the field of scientific thought. Bachelard believed it was necessary to question everything, and to recognise the potency of 'epistemological obstacles', those elements which have value because they do not fit into existing structures. Bachelard obtained his doctorate from the Sorbonne in 1927 with two dissertations, reflecting his research in thermodynamics, and the acquisition of scientific knowledge. Significantly he made bridges between the objective, reasoned world of science, and the poetic realm of human subjectivity and consciousness, reflected in his phenomenological writings. Gaynor and McLean's identification of the co-ordinates for an ecological art history appear to sit quite firmly on the axes of 'poetry' and 'science' which Bachelard identified, and thus are replete with all of the potential and all of the problems that such encounters invite.

It is with the writing of history, the notion of historiography, that Helen Whitbread is concerned. Through critically reviewing a number of recent landscape architectural histories, Whitbread demonstrates the significance of the historian's own perspective, with differing theoretical frames leading to the debunking of some myths, and the creation of others. In addition to surveying the broad terrain of recent discourse on the notion of writing history, Whitbread's focus is particularly on the construction of Australian landscape architectural history. Testing examples against models, Whitbread explores the dynamic body of knowledge that is involved in the construction of histories of landscape architecture.

One of the histories to which Whitbread refers is Catherin Bull's *New Conversations in an Old Landscape*, which is reviewed in this issue by Linda Corkery. This book is concerned with iconic designed landscapes in Australia, and is something of a

benchmark of the culmination of 40 years of practice. Bull's references elsewhere to the notion of a canon in Australian landscape practice, and the selection of iconic examples of design, are examples of making history – of the ways in which such writing and survey constructs a version of the past, highlighting and selecting, as much as excluding and omitting.

Amongst the works explored in Bull's survey is Room 4.1.3's Garden of Australian Dreams at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. The collaborators in Room 4.1.3 have quite firmly written themselves into the history of landscape architectural practice in Australia. And with the recent publication of *Room 4.1.3: Innovations in Architecture*, they are writing themselves into the wider history of the discipline of landscape architecture. The book is reviewed here by Jillian Walliss, who poses a challenge to the process through which such discourse seeks to 'make' history. Asking how the 'social effect' is to be considered in such work, as opposed to design production, Walliss urges a view beyond the explorative, unbuilt works into how designed work might be experienced as built space.

While the perspectives that are taken in the writing of history determine a particular version of events, turning attention towards a hitherto neglected aspect of history can also reveal a great deal. Mira Engler undertook such a shift in focus with the writing of *Designing America's Waste Landscapes*. Gale Fulton's review focuses upon the potentially restorative experience of these very particular kinds of places. While the landscapes of waste might be the locus of feelings of ruin and hopelessness, Fulton draws from Engler's work the inspirational message that such landscapes are the possible domains of experimentation and exploration, opportunities for creative expression of landscape architecture, new histories in the making.

History is in essence holographic. There is a sense that there is something there, yet it is not tangible. The form that it takes for us is contingent upon where we view it from. Yet histories are integral in the definition of identity – of individuals, of nations and of professions. The two articles included here, together with the three books and related reviews, illustrate the challenges associated with locating the present in the context of the past, with finding different perspectives, and with exploring the fruitful domains at the edges and the in-betweens of disciplines.

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