

Contemporary Landscapes of Contemplation

A REVIEW BY JACKY BOWRING

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'Is a contemplative landscape a place of relaxation, designed to still the mind of thoughts? Is a reductive design vocabulary imperative? Or is it a place that should prompt new insights to emerge – perhaps by providing an intense or unique visual focus?'

REBECCA KRINKE POSES THESE QUESTIONS as the genesis of *Contemporary Landscapes of Contemplation*, which resulted from a symposium held in 2002 at the College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, University of Minnesota. The book, which collects essays by Krinke, Marc Treib, John Beardsley, Michael Singer, Lance Necker and Heinrich Hermann, aims to 'contribute to both scholars of landscape and those involved with the making of landscapes. Definitions, theories, and case studies of contemplative landscapes are explored' (pp xi–xii).

Landscape architecture's frequently bemoaned lack of theory makes this book's ambition very welcome. The essays, by a range of renowned scholars and practitioners, contribute to the body of knowledge in landscape architecture by documenting a range of landscapes that promote contemplation. The sites discussed will be familiar to many within landscape architecture; for example, James Turrell's Roden Crater, Walter De Maria's Lightning Field and Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin.

The invocations of theory in *Contemporary Landscapes of Contemplation* reflect some of the more well-rehearsed approaches within landscape architecture discourse, such as Necker's use of the metaphor of language to explicate the subtleties of the memory landscape of Berlin, and Krinke's application of the Kaplans' environmental psychology principles in her two case study sites.

It is peculiar, however, that the editor describes the subject of contemporary landscapes of contemplation as 'underdeveloped' (p xi). Perhaps emphasis is more often on the 'contemporary' aspect, yet even so, most of the examples discussed in the book have been well covered in various publications. And neither is the 'contemplative' aspect underdeveloped in the discourse. The significant point is that there is a developed body of thinking on contemplative landscapes, but it is largely overlooked. An entire discipline – that of philosophy – offers a field of thinking on the relationship between contemplation and landscape, yet this book is silent on the rich underpinnings of philosophy and questions of existence.

The paradox is that while landscape architecture suffers its lack of theory and sees aspects such as contemplative landscapes as discursively 'underdeveloped', there is a sense of selective vision. A case in point is Krinke's own essay, where in seeking

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to draw out the contemplative qualities of two case study sites, she conceptualises them as the 'clearing' and the 'forest'. The two sites are the Reflection Garden in the Bloedel Reserve in Washington State, USA, and the courtyard of the National Library of France in Paris, which perform as 'clearing' and 'forest' respectively. Such terms are powerfully evocative of the philosophy of Heidegger, who wrote on the notion of the *Lichtung* or clearing in the forest as a place of 'lighting' – meaning lighting in the sense of 'opening' rather than being 'bright'. Heidegger sees the clearing as the place where Being shows itself, where the whole nature of Dasein – our being there, our existence is revealed.

This also ties in with the issue which Beardsley circles in teasing out the connection between the phenomenal and the metaphysical, which is evoked by the contemplative state. Referring to, for example, the dry stone garden of Daisen in Japan, Beardsley discusses how these sites become the places for the 'staging or the apperception of events: the sound of wind through bamboo; the change in qualities of light; the projection of shadows on raked gravel; the melting of snow, the scattering of leaves.' (Beardsley, 2005, p 183). This shuttling between the visible and the invisible, the contemplation of existence, or the revelation of a Dasein moment in this stone garden, is a compelling idea in phenomenological theory, where, in the words of Heidegger, 'The work of art renders visible the invisible, brings silence into the audible as it gathers world as world.' (Heidegger, 1971, p 168). And in a landscape context the words of Erwin Straus reinforce this, although referring to landscape painting he equally speaks of contemplative landscapes: 'Great landscapes all have a visionary character. Such vision is of the invisible becoming visible' (in Bogue, 2003, p 258).

The coalescence of philosophy and the visual arts is of critical importance to landscape architecture, and in the context of contemplative landscapes the current theological turn, as seen in the work of Jean-Louis Chrétien and Jean-Luc Marion, is particularly compelling. Chrétien's *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art*, poetically unfolds the phenomenology of interacting with artworks, which may, of course, be equated with landscape architecture. The notion of finding 'silent music' in paintings evokes much that is contemplative in the act of engaging with artworks. Marion's work on saturated phenomenology is profoundly evocative of the intangible quality of contemplation and the type of metaphysical metamorphoses that spark in the ether. The notion of 'bedazzlement' or 'amazement' speaks strongly of the epiphanic event – contemplation at its most overwhelming. Yet Marion offers no strategies or guidelines for how such an intense event might be achieved, since to set out to achieve it would preclude its occurrence. He refers to epiphanic events as invisible, which is not 'invisible' but something that 'cannot be aimed at' (Marion, 2002, p 199). An understanding of saturated phenomenology expands our belief in the absolute ability of phenomena to take our breath away, to leave us ungrounded and to help us apprehend the sublime.

One of the most evocative examples of the fusion of philosophy, poetics and design is found in *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*, by Steven

Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa and Alberto Pérez-Gómez. This small volume of essays and studies of the play of phenomena is infused with a sense of contemplation; the content, the style of writing and use of imagery all convey this. In contrast with *Contemporary Landscapes of Contemplation*, the writing is poetic and the images are intense and well produced. Sheets of tracing paper carrying additional imagery, diagrams and text are interleaved with the text, adding to a sense of sustained meditation. However, in *Contemporary Landscapes of Contemplation*, the poor image reproduction and uninspired layout do little to create an enticing volume. Washed out and lacking contrast, the images (aside from those in the colour insert which are at least crisp) fail to capture the sense of depth and space, the qualities of light and shadow, which are vital to the conveying of contemplative space.

The essays in *Contemporary Landscapes of Contemplation* offer a range of observations about how selected sites facilitate or inspire contemplation. Yet, there is a sense of limited disciplinary horizons restricting the scope of the endeavour, rather than embracing a much more expansive view. Through opening the discourse of landscape architecture to philosophy the nature of contemplation and landscape can be better understood and value may be added to the study of exemplars of contemplative landscape.

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