Beyond Landscape MacArchitecture: new languages, new landscapes

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THE SINE QUA NON OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE is respect for the genius loci, but even in the landscape, as in architecture and society more generally, a process of cultural homogenisation has been taking place. Against this process, a resurgence of interest in minority languages in Europe can be seen as an assertion of pride, and a desire to preserve difference. In Scotland, landscape architects are attempting to reinterpret Scottish and northern European urban design influences and materials: in effect to develop a new regional dialect for the new landscapes. Rooted in sound design principles and materials which respond to and reflect the climate, way of life and traditions of the place, design languages can communicate effectively about cultural values and differences.

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MODERN SCOTTISH URBAN LANDSCAPE construction and reconstruction owe more to the production line—to standardised factory-made products and unskilled labour—than to traditional materials and craft skills. In many cases products are designed with the largest markets in mind, thus many new materials are first developed in the United States and then, once in production, spread to dominate other markets. This tendency has been emphasised in Scotland by the dominance of a small number of relatively large practices, many of which had links with American design schools.

The characteristic urban landscape design shaped by these American origins and connections is truly of its time, and speaks volumes, in a mid Atlantic drawl, about the macroeconomic market forces operating in western-style democratic capitalism. It has much less to say to or about the particular place and society upon which it has been imposed. Perhaps it is appropriate that this phenomenon reached its peak in the United Kingdom in the 1980s under a prime minister who reputedly claimed that 'there is no such thing as society' (Kingdom 1992).

Landscape design is not unique in this respect, of course, as the same processes have affected architecture (Frampton 1980) and given us the ubiquitous mass-produced conveniences and artefacts of modern life: fast food, fast track, fast landscapes. As in these other areas, the extent of the homogenisation of urban landscape design is being acknowledged and addressed by growing numbers of those within the profession. Many have recognised a need for urban landscape to say more about regional identity and character (Faculty of the Built Environment 1993).

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Landscape and language

Although the most obvious languages are usually written or spoken, the idea of languages without words is widely accepted; music, mathematics or sign languages are ready examples. Because above all the landscape is perceived visually by most human observers, the concept of visual languages is of central

interest. Taking a strong position on this concept, some argue that a vocabulary and grammar could be systematically constructed either by design and observation of the world (Edwards 1987) or by unravelling the pre-verbal deep-structure hypothesised to be used by the mind to order perception (Gregory 1981). Others claim merely that extralinguistic forms of expression are valid, as supported by analogies such as music or mathematics.

Neither the dominance of vision in perceiving landscape nor the metaphor of landscape as a text composed of meaningful elements to be read by the observer is a new idea. Brigitte Wormbs explains how, in 1581, Michel de Montaigne advised 'Renaissance Man' to measure himself against his surroundings by observing them (videre), and that in order not to separate himself from them (dividere) he should learn to read the world like a book (Wormbs 1993).

More recently, the richness and power of the metaphor of landscape as language have led many writers to use it without explanation. As Launcelot 'Capability' Brown translates his own work (Stroud 1975):

> 'Now there', said he pointing his finger, 'I make a comma, and there', pointing to another spot, 'where a more decided turn is proper, I make a colon; . . . now a full stop, and then I begin another subject'.

The nature and applicability of the linguistic metaphor have been explored, like most areas of design theory, more in regard to architecture than landscape architecture. Tom Turner (1993) describes how in the 1960s the theories of semiology and structuralism were to systematise the concept of architecture as a non-verbal language, reducing it logically to a vocabulary of formal signifiers (things; such as form, space, colour, texture) used in certain ways to articulate signifieds (meanings; such as ideas, activities, values, functions). From a contrasting, empirical approach, Alexander (1977) developed a system of forms which he called a pattern language.

Although similar in result, the method and purpose behind the two systems proposed for architecture are significantly different. The assumptions underlying the system developed in the 1960s are rational, reductionist, and positivist: that we inhabit an ordered, knowable universe; that understanding this world involves logically systematising it according to the scientific method used so successfully to classify trees, for example, or sub-atomic particles; and that this system can be applied to the mind and the products of the mind as much as to inanimate objects. While in Alexander's empirical pattern language the world may be classified, the reductionist hierarchy—with its implications of either infinite reduction, or reduction to fundamental elements—is rejected. Instead a more holistic 'web' of overlapping entities is proposed, underpinned by the behaviourist assumption that the response to a certain input is a certain output, without requiring an 'explanation' of cause.

Both approaches may now be enriched by the postmodern admission that meaning derives from an interaction between the observed and the observer, so that the number of meanings which may be read into the same object or event is limited only by the imagination and references of all the people observing it. Thus, in the postmodern scheme, the eye gives way to the brain as the principle organ of perception, and the ability to communicate unambiguously is called into question.

In face of these uncertainties, Abrami (1993) claims that postmodernist architecture has abandoned the attempt to communicate meaning, now tending 'to simply realise a project as a means of displaying individual creativity and skills'. But Venturi (1966) had actually suggested a more sophisticated interpretation: that artists and architects actually use ambiguity and contradiction to reveal higher truths or to resolve apparently conflicting experiences into a new pattern. In this way, architecture, like language, is an artificial system which is continually being adapted so as to communicate unambiguously. Where ambiguities arise, the language, as an artificial system, is refined to allow them to be resolved.

It may still be possible, therefore, to consider an essentially artificial practice, such as creating built form, to be a language. For landscape, however, the addition of complexities through assimilating artificial and natural systems, and of the dimensions of time and growth in the landscape, creates something which is qualitatively different from a purely synthetic phenomenon. Although the synthetic parts of the world are increasing, and in many areas have coalesced, they will always have an edge onto the natural somewhere. Characterised by such elements of ongoing change, landscape can never lend itself entirely to unambiguous or 'resolved' communication. The wide use of the linguistic metaphor and its intuitive attraction and power should not be cause to forget that a landscape is a landscape and a language is a language. A landscape may share some of the characteristics of a language but there is not direct equivalence.[1] While the concept can be applied constructively to aspects of the landscape, landscape as language must remain a metaphor not a description.

So, to which parts of the landscape should the language metaphor be applied? In answering this question, it is helpful to consider three principle meanings of language:

- a functional purpose (communication)—for example, a garden as a paradise;
- a cultural artefact (dialect)—for example, a walled courtyard with orange trees;
- a physical act (diction)—for example, planting the trees.

I believe that the metaphor is most interesting and useful to the practising landscape architect when applied to those parts of the landscape which are cultural artefacts and which therefore, by design or accident, communicate meaning. In this area it becomes a tool for design and critique.

While the landscape is not a language, there is a strong case to be made that landscape architecture is. It is useful again to draw from discussions within the architectural field, where Norberg-Schulz (1975) has argued that the true purpose of architecture is to make human existence meaningful, using a system of symbols, as all other functions of constructions such as shelter and concealment can be fulfilled by mere building. If we define landscape architecture as those parts of the landscape which make human existence meaningful in this sense, then it is a system of symbols, or language.

As with verbal languages, we all use our own personal language and set of references, intuitive or learned, to read and interpret landscapes. Training in reading the landscape, for example, can produce differences between personal languages. For example, I regret losing the ability to enjoy the majesty of the windswept Scottish Highlands unreservedly since learning to read it as an artificial desert maintained by burning to raise grouse and by the grazing of exotic Mediterranean animals (sheep to you and me). There are, though, many

parts of personal languages which are shared, and it is these shared aspects which constitute a collective language. What is at issue is the extent to which a single collective language can absorb and speak for smaller pockets of shared personal languages. The mid Atlantic drawl, as described above, is a collective language of sorts. However, in view of Alexander's (1979) claim that every society which is alive and whole will have its own unique and distinct language, the restricted vocabulary and lack of subtlety or precision characterising Landscape MacArchitecture indicate its poverty, and suggest the cultural poverty of the society which uses it.

The rise of the region in Europe

As the United States and the former Soviet Union withdraw from Europe to concentrate on domestic issues, so their influence wanes, and Europe now looks to consolidate itself as an independent power block. European Union, whether purely economic or expanding to include monetary union, defence and international policy, inevitably weakens the member nation states. At the same time, regions within each state are strengthened. First, in terms of political strength, they are able to send representatives directly to the European Parliament, which can overturn or redirect national government policies. Moreover, regional identity and worth have seemingly developed further after trade barriers within Europe were lifted in 1992, opening up trade and travel, cooperation and competition, between regions of different countries.

Diversity and cultural difference are being recognised as reasons for pride, not shame, and are used as economic tools to attract inward investment and tourism. Catalonia and its capital, Barcelona, in Spain are an excellent example of this trend. The Catalan consciousness of neglect and discrimination under Franco has maintained a cultural identity which, since the return of democracy, has both fuelled and been fuelled by a massive resurgence in landscape design: 'the language of modern Architecture and design has become a symbol of the region's drive to define and establish a modern identity' (Rayner 1994). Catalonia is now a major centre for distinctive design and tourism, while Barcelona hosted the Olympics in 1992, and has undergone perhaps the most extensive rebuilding and reshaping programme of any European city. The Cerda nineteenth century city grid has been extended to create an entirely new barrio along the waterfront, and many distinctive urban open spaces have been designed and built. Glasgow in Scotland has also reinvented itself, dispelling the razor gang images of the 1960s and 1970s. It has, for instance, hosted a National Garden Festival in 1988, and was the European City of Culture in 1990 under the slogan 'Glasgow smiles better'.[2]

In Europe, regional languages such as Catalan, Gaelic and Welsh are regaining popularity after decades of decline. For example, Welsh is now part of the national curriculum in Wales and the number of school children speaking it doubled over a decade (National Census 1991, reported in the Welsh Office Social Census 1993). Regional dialects are also becoming more acceptable; accents which would have been unthinkable only a few years ago are to be heard reading the news on the BBC and announcing policy from the government front bench without attracting comment.

Acceptance of, and indeed pride in, regional languages and dialects are just one sign of a strengthening regional identity and pride. Another is the desire for regional dialects of landscape architecture.[3]

Dialects of landscape architecture: the Scottish situation

In the early 1980s many landscape architects in Scotland were questioning the dominance of the then current materials and styles. Urban spaces created in the previous decades using the mid Atlantic vocabulary of standardised, mass-produced materials were failing to mature successfully. The concrete block pavior, intended to provide the texture and scale of brick or stone at the cost of concrete, was felt to have failed, due to overuse, poor design (much of it by engineers and architects, as well as landscape architects), the Scottish climate, with its almost daily cycle of wetting and drying, and freezing and thawing for six months of the year, and the extensive use of salt on roads and footpaths. Town centre revitalisation or pedestrianisation schemes using the standard range of pre-cast concrete materials along with forests of street furniture sometimes looked old before they were finished.

As a result these places were read as 'another pedestrianised street', rather than 'our street', while the use of the same standard materials in the town square as in the filling station forecourt said to people 'your place is nothing special'.

Scottish landscape architects felt that there must be a way of using materials and construction techniques to create urban spaces of quality and character appropriate to Scotland at the end of the twentieth century. Regarding neither the American nor southern European designs in the literature as appropriate to the climate or the culture of Scotland, they began to look to northern Europe: to the Netherlands, Denmark, and especially Germany where skills and commitment to the urban environment had been maintained through the post-war reconstruction programme. Here were examples of the use of high quality, durable materials, and construction techniques to create not pastiches or reconstructions, but places which were clearly of their time, while retaining traditional values and approaches to texture, scale, place and function.

The regional, national and international Bundesgartenschau were particularly productive sources of inspiration. These flexible spaces said 'do your own thing', and were simple and modern, but not aggressively stylised. Whereas new urban spaces in Barcelona may say 'we are a stylish, fashionable people', the spaces of Munich or Stuttgart reflect how extravagance and showy displays are not considered necessary. Quality, thoroughness, fitness for purpose, endurance, even understatement, are the language of these landscapes.

Yet the application of good design principles means that the spaces created in northern Europe, and now in Glasgow, are satisfying, and the use of quality materials introduces texture and diversity. Because principles and materials are often developed from traditional equivalents, there are advantages in both affirming the value and significance of the regional history, and confirming that the place is still growing and improving. The future is as important a subject as the past for landscape to address, and the spaces created make a commitment to it: 'This place deserves long-term investment.'

Attention to detail is another sign that the designer and builder have taken this particular place seriously. Nothing tells people that their place is 'just

another job' more clearly than the unresolved junction between two standard details. Careful construction and choice of materials ensure that the space will last long enough to become part of people's lives, and to enter their vocabulary.

The places also communicate function clearly where necessary. For example, the importance of pedestrians and cyclists is stated by the careful design, selection and arrangement of materials to suit their particular requirements, as well as to give them their own space and significance. In addition, because the spaces are flexible, mixed and varied uses for them can develop, especially with the quality of the materials and the details ensuring that the spaces survive long enough for them to do so. Furthermore, a place growing old gracefully with its users sets up a dialogue over the years from which layers of meanings develop.

An example: the Glasgow Cathedral Precinct

In 1989 the Glasgow Cathedral Precinct was completed. This prominent urban space outside St Mungo's Cathedral was the setting for formal occasions and processions, as well as informal visits to the cathedral and adjacent hospital and museums. The horizontal surfaces and planting were designed by Ian White Associates, Landscape Architects, in collaboration with Page and Park, Architects, who designed the vertical surface (walls and railings).

Figure 1: Glasgow Cathedral Precinct. Bold use of hard materials to create an unashamedly urban setting for activities (photo: Mark Scott)

The space is composed of two axial spaces which intersect at an acute angle in front of the main door to the cathedral. The only planting is of semi-mature lime trees in double avenues of tree grilles to form the 'walls' of these spaces and line the main views. Kept clear and uncluttered, the ground plane formed of smooth new York stone flags along the principal routes, and new granite

cubes elsewhere with a trim of new polished granite relating the elements and forming borders to the panels of stone.

The space is thus read as clearly urban, and available to the public for use. Granite (as well as whin, used in later projects) is a traditional Scottish paving material for roads and industrial areas; it is hard wearing and can be lifted and relaid many times. With the increase in volume, speed and weight of traffic this century, setts had become less popular as they are noisy and rough at high speeds. In addition, because setts are rectangular and irregular in length, they are laid in running bond, which does not allow interlock, leading to 'creep' particularly where heavy traffic brakes or turns. Thus many setted streets were overlaid with asphalt to give a smoother, quieter ride at high speeds, and sett and cube production ceased at Scottish quarries—requiring the granite cubes, kerbs and trims for this scheme to be imported from Portugal. York stone flags are a traditional high quality paving stone in buff colours, with excellent slip and wear characteristics, often used to complement ashlar sandstone buildings. The use of these quality, durable materials with traditional links describes the permanence of the work, the connection to the past, and the commitment to the future.

The use of modern construction techniques forms the link between past and future, while the design was directed towards the spaces being read as 'of their time', clearly relevant to the present. To answer the additional concern that the spaces themselves should be clear and legible, elements such as seats, walls, bollard, lights and monuments were organised to articulate the structure and purpose of the spaces, or as accents at key locations.

The strengths of the scheme, in the traditional sense, are the understanding of the formal and informal functions of the space, the clarity of the spatial organisation, the choice and use of natural stone paving materials, and the subtlety and skill of the detailing. The designers also insisted on a high level of supervision to ensure that the build quality matched the specifications.

The project immediately attracted widespread interest within the profession, among designers and clients alike. It suggested that a quality and character of place previously thought to be a thing of the past, could actually be a thing of the future. And so it proved. The Glasgow Cathedral Precinct went on to win a Civic Trust Award and a number of national landscape awards during the following two years. Responses from the public and regular users of the space were also favourable, as trained and untrained readers of the landscape found the choice and organisation of elements clear and legible.

An emergent Scottish dialect

Perhaps the most valuable contribution made by the Glasgow Cathedral Precinct project to Scottish landscape architecture was that it broke the cycle of disbelief that had stifled the development of a regional language of urban landscape architecture and coerced designers into using the tired vocabulary of the mid Atlantic. It became the benchmark for a number of subsequent high profile, urban, landscape projects, including work by engineers, architects and landscape architects in Fort William, Aberdeen, Eyemouth, Kilmarnock, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Stirling and Dundee. These projects indicate that a characteristically Scottish dialect of landscape architecture is emerging and developing.

Figure 2: Upper Castlehill, Stirling. New and recycled stone elements are used together

Four characteristics of that emergent dialect are now considered in further detail: sociable urbanity; traditional, quality materials; contemporary construction and design; and a spareness, free of unnecessary decoration.

SOCIABLE URBANITY

Urban spaces are treated as such without apology. Materials are predominantly hard, often natural stone and metalwork which are read as the characteristic symbols of Scottish urban spaces. Little or no attempt is made to 'soften' spaces by introducing the formerly ubiquitous raised planters, or allowing drifts of green slush to gather against buildings or fill awkward corners. Where planting is introduced, it generally takes a form which is clearly recognised as urban: standard trees or hedges. Both forms reflect the high value of urban land and the need to get as much value (shelter, shade and delight) out of the smallest occupancy of the ground plane. This approach is conveying the message that urban spaces are acceptable: they do not need to be disguised or pretend to be something else.

The spaces are also available and useable. The simplicity of the ground plane is an invitation to the eyes and the feet to explore the full extent of the space.

The arrangement of elements ensures the maximum area is available to the public for a mixed, active, civic life—symbolising of the belief in society that has survived in Scotland even throughout the individualistic 1980s south of the border.

There is an apparent attempt, too, to redress the balance between vehicles and pedestrians in town centres. Generally, past urban designers designed first for cars and secondly for pedestrians, and regarded the interests of pedestrians as best served by segregation. The results of these two principles for pedestrians in many cities were arduous, unpleasant and, when their path did cross those of the vehicles, hazardous as well. In the emergent dialect, many of the schemes involve both vehicular and pedestrian traffic, attempting to produce environments in which both can function, but perhaps the spaces read more often as pedestrian than vehicular.

TRADITIONAL, QUALITY MATERIALS

The use of high quality, durable materials is perhaps the most immediately apparent feature of these projects, often making the largest initial statement of the worth of a place. It is a message of commitment to the future and offers hope that the quality environment will endure. This aspect of the dialect has significant precedents: banks, for example, were usually built out of stone as people felt happier leaving their money in a building which looked as though it would be around for a while. Of course, the message itself was well founded, given that over a lifetime stone paving can be lifted and reused and will pay for itself in the long-term, while cast iron is almost indestructible. The materials also have brought new job and training opportunities to the landscape industry

Figure 3: Church of the Holy Rude, Stirling. Contemporary construction and design used to produce functional spaces (photo: Mark Scott)

Figure 4: Royal Mile, Edinburgh. The paving provides a ground plane for people and buildings; decoration is used sparingly (photo: Mark Scott)

in traditional areas of strength, along with the potential for significant re-expansion of stonemasonry and quarrying.

The use of traditional materials, the corresponding attention to detail, and the reintroduction of skilled labour in sett laying and metalwork are all recognisable to the reader of the landscape as a continuation of past strengths. Acknowledging local traditions in this way satisfies both of Eckbo's (1990) requirements for good designers—that is, they must 'respect people's desire for the continuity of traditional roots and for a vision of high future potential'. These requirements are especially significant in Scotland, where there is a particular awareness of and pride in its historical importance both for its own sake and for the trade and interest which it generates throughout the world. As Lyle (1991) points out:

> Meaning in landscape cannot be invented but has to derive from the locality's cultural roots . . . landscape of any quality and depth needs a meaning which belongs to the cultural spirit of the past, not as pastiche, but a unified ensemble of contemporary metaphor.

CONTEMPORARY CONSTRUCTION AND DESIGN

The Glasgow Cathedral Precinct and subsequent projects developed with the same dialect are not historical reconstructions of any particular moment in the past, real or imagined. The demands on the spaces are contemporary, the stone is produced in modern quarries, the metalwork in modern workshops. The laying patterns and techniques have been designed and refined to suit modern vehicular and pedestrian traffic and the places are intended for flexible, modern uses. For example, the 'bogen' pattern of granite cube laying is carefully designed to create interlock and prevent 'creep' under modern traffic loading, as well as to use the material as it is produced, without cutting or wastage. Putting 'heritage' street furniture of indeterminate period into truly historic places is becoming recognised as an error; instead, the practice now is often to use elements that are either genuinely significant historical pieces or simple modern designs.

Many of the design elements derive from the intelligent use of the materials out of which the places are built. Thus shapes and forms are built which use the natural strengths and avoid the weaknesses of the various materials. The result is a great strength and coherence to the reading of the place.

Strong contemporary landscape architecture with its roots in the past and a vision for the future can be 'culture-forming' (Thompson 1994), and can develop and extend the cultural identity of a region. But to do so takes time. With their combined strengths of spatial organisation and materials which are robust enough to last, these spaces should grow old gracefully, allowing enough time for a dialogue to develop between them and their users, and for the language elements to be incorporated into the users' personal and collective languages.

DECORATION

The aesthetic appeal of best of the schemes which use the developing regional dialect arises from the simplicity, elegance and appropriateness of the materials, detailing, and spatial organisation. The bare, spare appearance of some of these projects seems particularly characteristic, and distinct from contemporary schemes elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Pattern making or surface decoration for its own sake is added sparingly. Moreover, it is built up out of the constituent elements, rather than imposed upon them. Collaboration with artists is used to multiply the meanings, allowing the user or reader to engage with the space on more levels.

Conclusion

While the mid Atlantic drawl of mass-produced landscapes blurs cultural distinctions and undermines a regional sense of worth, the development of a regional dialect of urban landscape architecture is allowing landscape architects in Scotland to communicate positive values and messages to educated and intuitive readers of the landscape alike. The rapid spread of the dialect and its acceptance by professionals, the authorities and the public suggest that it is effectively communicating shared ideas and aspirations about the future of Scottish towns and cities. Like the iconic cultural landscape to the south—'the English countryside'—the dialect has grown out of the culture and is a functional product of its time. And only time will tell whether it will endure so well.

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NOTES

[1] The proposition that a language is a landscape is intriguing, but this is unlikely to be any kind of landscape with which a practising landscape architect would be familiar.

[2] The genuine rivalry between the smaller, more 'refained' Scottish capital, Edinburgh, and the big, earthy, industrial city of Glasgow is neatly captured in the second half of the slogan: 'than Edinburgh', which is so well understood that it can be left unsaid.

[3] This trend is noted for landscape architecture beyond Europe—for example, in Mexico (Thompson 1994) and Japan (Sasaki 1989).

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