

What are the Big Questions for Landscape Architecture Now?

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The earth seems to be spinning faster every day and, along with this, large amounts of information seem to surround us every minute. In the midst of this frenetic situation, and in certain measure because of it, our landscapes are the subject of transformations that are not always desirable and that in some cases are unsound.

In the context of the southern hemisphere, these trends highlight the following three questions.

- 1) Do we need to copy, or at least follow, northern hemisphere tendencies to solve our landscape troubles?
- 2) How should we deal with our misguided tendency to divide the world into biological and technological areas, and consequently fractioned solutions?
- 3) How should we deal with landscapes in the fast-moving urban–rural borders in our expanding cities?

In attempting to answer to these questions, I will outline the problems related to each of them.

- 1) Based on Benjamin Hennig's research at the University of Sheffield in 2005, and worldmapper¹ cartograms, figures 1 and 2 show there are conspicuous differences between the northern and southern hemispheres in two relevant matters: Figure 1 shows the difference in biodiversity and, in contrast, Figure 2 shows the difference in technology development and investment.

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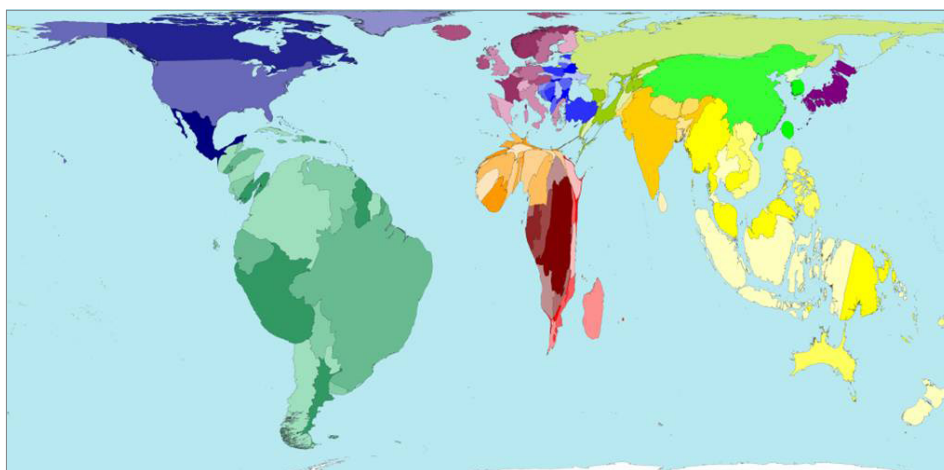


Figure 1: Biodiversity. (© Copyright SASI Group (University of Sheffield) and Mark Newman (University of Michigan). Used under Creative Commons licence.)

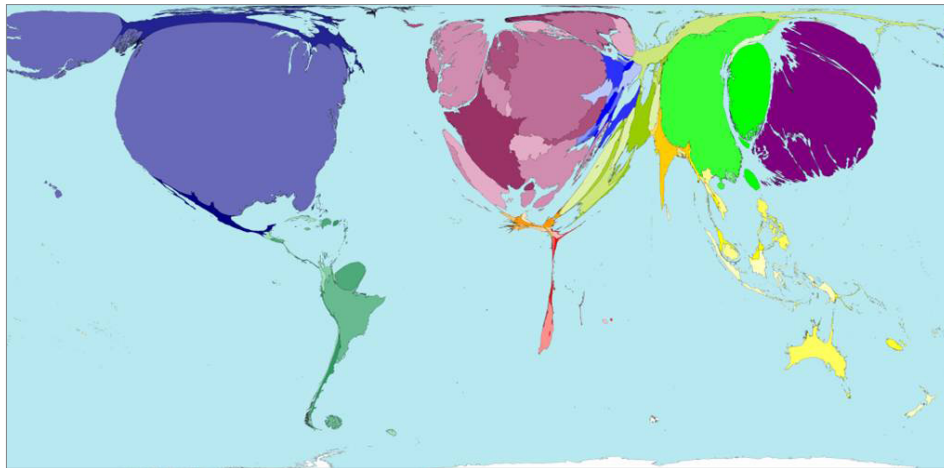


Figure 2: Technology development and investment. (© Copyright SASI Group (University of Sheffield) and Mark Newman (University of Michigan). Used under Creative Commons licence.)

In relation to the contrast between richness and available tools, usually a lack of resources and some sort of crisis stimulate the development of strategies to cope with survival needs. The history of a great part of the northern hemisphere has followed this pattern. In contrast, the richer southern hemisphere, perhaps, suffers from so-called ‘abundance risk’. This is the incapacity of an area to deal with its own richness and, what is worse, to fail to realise that such richness and abundance are finite. The results of this are seen clearly in everyday landscapes and, less obvious but latent, in particular landscapes carefully designed to compete in the fast and globalised world of the present.

In every way, local landscape design solutions are needed. ‘Locality’ is one of the outstanding conditions of sound landscape management.

At least in Latin America there are good examples of indigenous wisdom and harmonious adaptation to natural conditions that have resulted in sensible and fine landscapes full of identity. One example, in Colombia, is the Zenú ridge system. This was developed on the huge swamp lands in the north of the country where inhabitants built it not just to cope with flooding but to enjoy and profit from the water’s dynamics (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Pre-Hispanic Zenú ridge system in Colombia. (Banco de la República de Colombia.)

It is time to rediscover ourselves in relation to the Earth and our environment. It is time to go back to the indigenous belief that we are part of nature, not her kings, and to behave accordingly by sharing, receiving and giving, profiting from it while letting evolution occur at its own pace.

2) Modern specialisation has led professionals, committed to habitat development, to accommodate themselves in different corners. Here, they attempt to establish their own realms, and it is usually difficult to get them to leave the comfortable situation in which they are the undeniable authority. Although the present generalisation of the trend and need for interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary work are abundant and widespread, getting these concerns embedded in the minds of general professionals takes more than one generation to achieve.

The defensive attitude, where some disciplines prefer not to be questioned by other disciplines, has driven us to intellectual isolation and/or rivalry. The idea of not 'invading' the property of others keeps us separated from dialogue and joint work. In this way, specialists become even more specialised and forget the roots of their knowledge.

Technology has been drawn from nature. Nature has always inspired solutions. Ask Newton, for example! We do not need sophisticated technologies to face our landscape troubles.

On the other hand, the now prevalent immediatist attitude impedes the practice of tranquil but long-lasting landscape solutions. Everything has to be done NOW!

Yet nature observation is needed now more than ever to return professionals to local, sound and simple ways of acting, ways that also remind us of the convenience of being able to wait for natural processes.

3) In physical terms, from the point of view of planning and urbanism, landscape is frequently seen as a two-dimensional matter or a spot on a map. It is a beneficial but rare achievement when landscape is seen, treated and developed as a three-dimensional phenomenon.

The most difficult challenge for engineers, designers and architects, however, is to recognise the fourth dimension of landscape: *time*. This dynamic applies to work with living things. Although perceptions of time relentlessly invade our lives and consciousness – as suggested at the beginning of this paper – societies are not aware enough and our professionals not trained enough to deal with complex landscape dynamics.

Urban–rural borders are spaces where this lack of training is much evident. These are the spaces where more refined skills are required from landscape professionals to achieve successful development. The professional's first task is to underline the issues involved in these spaces for all actors involved, but especially for planning and development authorities that are usually pressed by administrative periods and deadlines.

In urban–rural borders all sorts of conflicts converge. These spaces are a kind of laboratory, where many things happen in an informal, rapid and very human way, and they are also our great landscape challenge.

Constructing landscapes that highlight natural features and resources (instead of sophistication and foreign ways of behaving) is a valuable activity, gaining a landscape that not only is nice to look at but also reflects the nature that underlies and always will underlie human location, activities, settlements and architectural artefacts.

This approach will surely reward us with a variety of benefits besides a gratifying habitat, and perhaps with stronger feelings of identity, while minimising natural menaces, conserving the landscape's richness and singularity, and being inexpensive to implement.

Landscape architecture professionals in southern hemisphere countries need to undertake research in the discipline that will allow them to share knowledge and to work together, and to acknowledge differences while recognising and respecting others.

NOTES

- 1 Worldmapper is a collection of world maps, where territories are resized on each map according to the subject, developed by the SASI Group.