

What are the Big Questions for Landscape Architecture Now?

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In 2011, the Institute of Architecture and Urbanism at the Universidad Austral de Chile conducted the first seminar on landscape architecture in southern Chile. It was entitled 'Landscapes of the South: State of the art and challenges'. After listening to attendees and speakers from different disciplines and areas of work, I realised that many issues relating to the field of landscape architecture urgently need to be clarified. It is unclear, for example, what we mean by 'landscape', what the scope of the landscape architect's role is and, especially, what the difference between architecture and landscape architecture is. For southern hemisphere countries like Chile, where the discipline is fast emerging, similar questions arise. What is the difference between landscape and nature? What is the difference between landscape architecture and landscaping? What does the landscape architect do? What is landscape architecture?

The lack of opportunities in Chile for landscape architects and non-landscape architects to meet to discuss these issues has contributed to the creation of a fragile environment, where the country's resources are being used more and more frequently and with low sensitivity to their longevity. Environmental laws focus on protecting only what is at stake or what is useful to us. The landscape is beyond classification and, therefore, beyond any kind of protection by the state. These two facts constantly reinforce the lack of recognition of the landscape as part of our culture, thereby promoting its misuse and violation. For this reason, it is urgent that we keep organising seminars and events where landscape architects can interact with others, especially in areas where landscape architecture is emerging as a discipline.

These events, however, should consider more than concepts and historical facts. It is essential to broaden the scope of questions to cover current issues, such as the increasing number of earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and floods that have destroyed areas in many countries within the past few years. These natural disasters have led me to change my way of thinking, researching, teaching and promoting the discipline of landscape architecture in my country. The first question that I pose is related to landscape architecture as a response to the force of nature. How do we introduce the notion of landscape architecture in the planning of human settlements that are prone to natural disasters?

The answer to this question deserves a considered discussion, and it is not my aim to tackle it here. I do venture to suggest, however, that, although the tools and human resources are available, a robust voice to disseminate the value of landscape architecture in Chile is missing. This voice should be able to introduce

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the criteria used by landscape architects in the diagnostic process of human settlements and in city planning. We need to learn to communicate and engage others with the objective of inspiring conservation and care of the landscape.

The landscape should be understood as a place, region or territory where nature and its dynamics interact harmoniously with a society, its laws and its requirements. Hence, our relationship with the landscape should be not just theoretical but also practical, tangible, visible and possible, and it should be supported with energy and insistence. Landscape architecture must not succumb to the laws of urban planning, politics and economics, but rather should include, interact and coexist with these realms. Landscape architecture should be able to enthuse a large number of disciplines with the scenic beauty of a landscape as well as with the laws of natural science that bring a landscape to life.

The following question arises from this urgency to clarify issues and relates to the level of impact of landscape architecture. How does landscape architecture become a comprehensive field of action? To begin with, landscape architects should learn to place the scope of their work – whether it is practical, academic or in research – in relation to national and international agencies. The landscape architect must be able to have a conversation with politicians, state representatives, investors and, at the same time, the community. From another perspective, professionals from diverse backgrounds should begin to ‘untie’ themselves and let their work be permeated by the landscape. Such reciprocity should allow other professionals, who are not landscape architects, but whose work is related to this area, to cross the boundaries of their disciplines and understand the effect they have on the landscape, both positive and otherwise. This is not an easy task. The way we act as professionals is strongly influenced by the training we receive. Nowadays, few careers include the notion of landscape within their subject areas and even fewer train their students to learn the way their discipline interacts with the landscape.

Ensuring that the criteria and concepts used in the field of landscape architecture pervade the work of other professionals is complex, but I have the conviction it is possible. In this regard, the answer to the next big question may be the most difficult of all but, if accomplished, may lead landscape architecture to be more than just a discipline: it may become a way of life. How does landscape architecture’s approach to design and planning reach the community? I believe, in this case, it is vital to start teaching about landscape architecture at an early stage. Our actions as professionals are influenced by the values we acquire when we are young and by our past experiences. Therefore, turning landscape architecture into a way of life requires patience. It requires asking ourselves how we can prepare future generations for an adult life linked to nature, where people care for and protect the environment independently of their career choices.

The aim of educating in this way is to raise people’s awareness of their natural surroundings and, as such, to treat them with respect. It may be a new way to see and feel; ultimately, it is a new way to contemplate our surroundings. We need to create ways of working with the community to allow this new approach to survive and thrive and not to succumb to the ills of globalisation.

The questions I propose above are meant to provoke discussion and raise awareness of the landscape we live in, especially among those who are not

landscape architects. My aim is to emphasise not just the importance of landscape to humans but also its needs. As landscape architects, we should speak out for the landscape and make visible its value in creating a 'self-conscious' society, especially at this time, when the need to protect our fragile natural resources and the landscape is urgent.