

What are the Big Questions for Landscape Architecture Now?

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Reflecting on the profession's past as a way to consider the future, I am reminded of the fairly tumultuous ride that took place in the United States in the 1970s with the rise of scientific-based design, the McHargian eco-revolution. Soon thereafter Steven Krog's pivotal article appeared in *Landscape Architecture* magazine (1981) the title of which asked the question 'Is It Art?'. It was a pithy article, filled with declarations such as: 'Except for an occasional twitch, I fear the art in landscape architecture is experiencing suspended animation' (p 373). His historically famous conclusion was the suggestion that functional planning applications could not coexist with an artful design discipline. The topic was prominently taken up four years later with Catherine Howett's article 'Landscape Architecture: Making a Place for Art' (1985), in which she suggests that the march toward institutionalisation (educational standards/degrees, accreditation, licensure) was the main culprit and that 'new departments were more often associated with agriculture, architecture, and engineering than they were with art, and the curriculum leading to a degree in landscape architecture has tended to emphasize scientific and technical knowledge as a necessary precondition of good design' (p 59).

I sense we are in the midst of a similar scenario today in which design emanates from, or is driven by, science. Of course, who could possibly argue against the importance of understanding the very complex situations of wetland mitigation, brown field restoration, intelligent storm water management? In fact, it seems ethically irresponsible not to do so given the stressed state of the global environment today. As I see students come into our programme wanting to make a difference, to have a positive impact on the myriad of environmental challenges and woes, I am filled with admiration, and hope.

And yet there is a slight, nagging whisper of a question in my mind as I see the seminars, studios, colloquia, swirling in widely varying scales, programmatic requirements and specialised technologies: *Where is the art?*

At the 2008 Council for Education in Landscape Architecture (CELA) conference, held at Penn State, there was a forensic session regarding the future of one of our most respected publications: *Landscape Journal (LJ)*. This came at a pivotal juncture for the publication and people were asked to assess its past record and reflect upon its future role. Out of that discussion came a thorough study entitled 'Landscape Journal and Scholarship in Landscape Architecture: The next 25 years' (Gobster, Nassauer and Nadenicek, 2010). Its mandate was to analyse the publication record of *LJ* but also to conduct a study of the state

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KEY WORDS

Landscape architecture

Artful design

Public engagement

REFLECTION

of scholarship in landscape architecture so as to guide the journal's future direction (Gobster et al, 2010). Of the five recommendations from that forensic session, two encouraged diversity: of subject matter and of contributors. That same report suggested 'enormous' opportunities for future publication in such areas as landscape planning/ecology; environmental psychology; conservation/restoration ecology and public health (pp 63–64). But more importantly, to me, was the opportunity to heighten the profession's value to society at large that, '[m]aking *LJ* more demonstrably relevant to society and to other disciplines in the natural and social sciences and in the arts and humanities is a fundamental way to demonstrate this value' (p 52).

So, let me retreat to my original observation – keeping in mind that the *LJ* recommendations were reflective of desired future trends in 'publishing' by and for landscape architects – to apply these observations to pedagogical activities. If there is perceived value in embracing all the arts and humanities (to enhance diversity of new knowledge) and if we are to indeed be relevant to society (not just regarding our ability to mediate environmental disasters) we need to find ways of reaching out to a large populace, to heighten awareness of the sculpted land, to engage citizens of our cities, in the way that Bxybee Park (Hargreaves Associates) had done in southern California in the late 80s; and in the way Christo and Jeanne-Claude's 'The Gates' in Central Park brought people together in 2005; and in the way Field Operations is coalescing a diverse community today with the Highline in New York City. These are but a few artful, expressive experiences, some declaratively ART, others quietly wonderful, sometimes playful, reincarnations of worn existing urban spaces.

The marriage of artfulness and environmental responsibility (aka 'science') seems a frontier ripe for further investigation. Certainly Joan Nassauer's long interest in 'cues to care' in the function of aesthetics as related to natural plantings and public perception has been with us since 'Messy Ecosystems, Orderly Frames' was published in 1995. But she, in collaboration with various colleagues, has recently explored the complex relationship between aesthetics and ecology, while admitting that 'some would argue that aesthetics has little ... to do with the ecology of landscapes' (Gobster, Nassauer and Daniel, 2007, p 961). This research goes on to explore the necessary component of human–environment interactions as understood from an environmental psychology perspective – an attempt to view objectively what some deem measurable components.

Another research team has conducted case studies for effective storm water management, but also evaluated the designs for their aesthetic value (Echols and Pennypacker, 2008). They coined the phrase 'artful rainwater design' (p 268). But, in particular, it is their attention paid to the public relations opportunities that I feel is intriguing – being mindful of the message sent to the public. This is less an objective, quantifiable approach, but one that holds aesthetics and public perception in an imperfectly measurable, but no less salient, equal balance.

Ultimately, I believe that the way to the public's heart is through relevance, and enriched experience, and engagement – all of which are fairly ephemeral, but art does matter – it is the critical connection. Aesthetics is a means for joining ecology and everyday human existence.

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