

# *Culture, environment, design: the UNITEC Bachelor of Landscape Architecture*

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IN 1997 NEW ZEALAND WILL GAIN its second undergraduate programme in landscape architecture. While Lincoln University has for some years offered a Bachelor of Landscape Architecture, for the first time Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, will be served directly by such a programme through the UNITEC Institute of Technology.

Landscape architecture has become an important factor in Auckland's development. The Auckland metropolitan region, like New Zealand itself, is characterised by a heterogeneous mix of environmental and cultural qualities. The nature of its landscape, however, is unique in this country. Its rapid development from a nineteenth century Maori settlement to a sprawl of motorways, suburbs and modern amenities has overwhelmed its landscape setting. While other towns and cities blend soothingly with their spectacular physical environments, Auckland is characterised by incoherent urban form and a wildly eclectic cultural landscape which divides it from its setting. It is New Zealand's only seriously metropolitan region: one third of this clean, green country's people live in a vast suburb. The magnificent natural landscape of harbours and hills is richly diverse, very near to hand and yet strangely remote.

There are other forces at work in the region's development. As a multicultural community Auckland faces a wide range of contemporary issues which impinge on its physical environment. This environment was for the most part constituted within a social development which took little account of either the indigenous Maori culture or of plurality and diversity within immigrant cultures: urban and regional development was inflected towards a dominant European culture and history. But in contemporary New Zealand, as the editor of *Landscape Review* pointed out in the inaugural issue (Swaffield 1995), the myth of a single unitary culture to which we all conform has been shattered. Similarly, the idea of a shared, monological model of understanding is being replaced by not one but a range of epistemologies based on the proposition that all knowledge is *situated*. Both scientific and popular knowledge is now seen as relative to frames of reference. The assured positivism of modernist landscape architectural design has given way to landscape typologies derived from individual and often quite subjective readings whose prime responsibility is to place. The physical environment itself is seen as a site of economic, political and social power. In order to understand how people relate to landscape we must ask, Who is speaking? Who are they speaking for?

Certainly these questions were seldom asked in the past. This is apparent throughout New Zealand's landscape, from the stigmatisation of fertile but undeveloped countryside as 'Maori land', to the invention of New Zealand as a beach culture drenched in surf and sun imagery, mindless of the peoples for whom this is an idle and irrelevant characterisation.

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REPORT

The UNITEC BLA reflects its location in Auckland and its location in contemporary theory. It is urban and pluralistic. It takes for granted the notion that there are many small stories about the world rather than a single big one. It is designed to empower students' own sense of enquiry by encouraging them to negotiate a pathway through a diverse mix of interrelated stand-alone courses, taking on board the core body of knowledge as they go, but exploring new sites in the process.

There are three main streams of study—culture, environment and design—which proceed through the four years of the programme. Students may choose theory courses from the culture and/or environment themes, which they can draw on for their creative work in the central design theme, putting ideas into action. The cultural dimension which informs the design process ensures that social, psychological, economic, political and aesthetic factors are brought into the form-building process. The environment theme provides both a sustainability philosophy and the technical expertise to realise it in practice. Auckland's fractured environment needs landscape architects who are sensitised to both natural and cultural landscapes, whose own work negotiates diversity without succumbing to meaningless variety or trite symbolism.

The core of the programme, therefore, is design. Students are encouraged to internalise the languages of design and use them in the critique of others' and their own work. They are trained to interpret landscapes, to read them and understand them—both the conditions of their production and the aesthetic frameworks through which they seek to touch us. To develop students' design abilities, a critical approach to prevailing methodologies is encouraged. The questions asked of student's designs are not Will it work? or even Is it good? But, Does it excite/engage me? Will it engage others? Does a coherent and appropriate idea inform this work? What is the quality of the idea? Students should develop the capability to achieve basic insights about the sites in which they are involved. This is not something that can be taught as a skill is taught. Students of landscape design need not information but understanding. Design projects are therefore devised which encourage divergent thinking, research, communication with others, self-critique and the assimilation of ideas from diverse sources.

Like other colonial societies, New Zealand has always been in a state of flux. The idea of New Zealand was invented in Europe and, after colonisation, a process of continual reinvention began (Bell 1996). The twentieth century has seen a self-conscious effort, particularly by artists and writers, to locate New Zealandness outside the British tradition, on the margins of Anglo-European narratives, and at the centre of a pan-Pacific identification with place.

It is a restless self-actualisation. Through re-examining our influences we continue to transform ourselves both culturally and politically. But we are not alone. Again, in his opening comments Simon Swaffield (1995, p.1) remarks that the challenges facing New Zealand landscape architects are 'in many ways a microcosm of those faced throughout Asia and the Pacific'. This 'regional political economy' at the end of the world is a centre, not of anxiety, but of influence. The landscapes of New Zealand are at the very centre of national debate. Questions concerning who owns the land, how it should be managed, scenic value, the cultural value of landscape, the stewardship of natural resources are all debated regularly and prominently in the media. The peoples of New

Zealand understand that landscape is both a product of culture and a way of constructing culture, that landscape and culture support and construct each other through time. Moreover, they arrange spaces in distinctive ways. Public swimming pools, beach resorts, front yards, farm yards, farmscapes, school grounds, cemeteries, national parks, marae and culs de sac are intimate to these peoples. They made them.

The construction of New Zealand's distinctive geography happened suddenly, rapidly and recently. The UNITEC BLA is part of this construction. Its graduates will go out into the community well equipped to deal with the voices of both conscience and society.

#### REFERENCES

Bell, Claudia (1996) *Inventing New Zealand*. Auckland: Penguin.

Swaffield, Simon (1995) Prospect. *Landscape Review* 1(1): 1-3.

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