

## *Editorial: is there meaning in landscape?*

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A CONCERN WITH MEANING has been one of the major features of recent landscape discourse. In a widely cited text, Meinig (1979) identified 10 potential meanings of landscape, and there has been a number of subsequent studies which either seek to uncover and interpret meaning embedded in landscape, or to explore the meanings assigned to particular landscapes by residents or visitors. In contrast, cultural theorists have focused upon the way meaning is created socially and politically, and some have argued that 'landscape' itself expresses a particular 'construction' of meaning (eg Cosgrove 1991). The idea that meaning might be constructed also finds expression in current design theory, as the designer's role is redefined from that of technical problem solver towards something more akin to the artist, creating new meanings for society (eg Krog 1981, Spirn 1988, Corner 1991).

An emphasis upon meaning, whilst widely embraced, is not without its problems or critics. Materialist commentators have argued that attempts to identify meanings in a landscape are inevitably selective, reflecting dominant power relations, and therefore problematic (Mitchell 1994). Other critics, notably Treib (1995), have challenged the assumption that meaning can be created by design, arguing that it can only accrue through time and use. Part of the difficulty lies in the different ways in which 'meaning' itself is defined – sometimes being used in a somewhat narrow technical sense drawn from communication theory, at others being used in a broader and more inclusive social and cultural context.

More fundamentally, however, there is also an underlying epistemological tension, between those who focus upon a search for 'essential' aspects of meaning in landscape phenomena, and those who place emphasis upon the particularity of meaning. For the former, essentialist position, interest lies in the way shared meaning can reside and be expressed in the patterns, forms and artefacts of landscape. For the latter, relativist position, this goal is misguided. What is important is to understand better, and celebrate, the richness and variety of meanings we bring individually to landscape phenomena. The positions are not typically as discrete as I have portrayed here, but the tensions are real, nonetheless.

In this issue of *Landscape Review* we present three articles which explore the theme of landscape meaning from contrasting perspectives. Ken Taylor argues that whilst meaning is undoubtedly mediated by individual experience, it is nonetheless possible and helpful to interpret landscapes as cumulative expressions of cultural meaning. He thus acknowledges some aspects of an essentialist position. Rod Barnett on the other hand emphasises the contingent nature of meaning in landscape, highlighting its diversity and instability, challenging us to reassess conventional design approaches. Julian Raxworthy also leans towards a relativist view, in a critique of meaning in conventional site

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design, concluding that 'site' is an imposed ordering, and hence meaning emerges from the interaction between the designer and their construction of site, rather than from 'the site' itself.

Meaning will also be an important concept in the second Languages of Landscape Architecture (LOLA 2) conference, scheduled for 10–12 July 1998 at Lincoln University, New Zealand. At LOLA 1 (see *Landscape Review* 1996:1(2) and 1996:2(3)) the majority of the papers focused upon the use of linguistic metaphors in landscape interpretation. In LOLA 2 the focus will be upon their role in design applications. Language is of course fundamentally concerned with shared meaning. The interpretation, expression, creation and management of 'meaning' will therefore be a central issue at the LOLA 2 conference. Full details are available from the convenors, Jacky Bowring (bowringj@lincoln.ac.nz) and Simon Swaffield (swaffies@lincoln.ac.nz). Refereed papers from the conference will be published in subsequent issues of *Landscape Review*.

#### REFERENCES

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