

Conference review

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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE EDUCATORS in Australia and New Zealand are scarce. With only 10 institutions in the region offering landscape architecture degrees the number of educators is small. By way of contrast, the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture (CELA) has some 64 member institutions, including 700 landscape educators. In geographical terms, Australia alone is nearly the size of the United States of America and, stretching the region even wider, New Zealand is located a further 2,500 kilometres to the east. The small number of educators and expansive region makes the creation of any sense of a community a challenging prospect. The opportunity to gather together in one location was therefore a very welcome one, overcoming the friction of distance in a way that supersedes any form of electronic communication.

The Australasian Educators in Landscape Architecture group (AELA) has experienced a patchy history. As a result of being a fairly informal organisation, ongoing meetings have relied on the initiative of individual institutions rather than a governing body. For a time during the 1980s and early 1990s conferences were held on a fairly regular basis. The last conference was held at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in 1996, followed by a period of silence. The need for another meeting was shuffling up the agendas of various institutions, but it was the University of New South Wales (UNSW) who made it happen. Spurred by a period of change within their faculty and programme, the pre-Olympic happenings in Sydney, and an approach from CELA following the Boston meeting in September 1999, the UNSW put out a call for papers for a conference in early February 2000. In a period of just three months Linda Corkery, Landscape Architecture Programme Head, and her team at UNSW put together a very memorable conference.

Twenty-five academics attended the conference, 19 of whom presented papers. With such a large proportion of the delegates speaking, the atmosphere was collegial rather than hierarchical, encouraging discussion and debate. One of the undercurrents of the conference was a concern with definition and identity, reflecting a perception of marginalisation in both a disciplinary and geographical sense. This surfaced in a range of ways, for example in defining the nature of creative process as research, and defining landscape architecture against incursion by architecture, defining this community of educators – as discussed at the end of this review. Professor Helen Armstrong addressed the issue of defining landscape architecture's creative processes as research from her experience and practice in refereed studios at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). (Issue 1999: 5(2) of *Landscape Review*, explored this idea in depth, and features a key article by Professor Armstrong.) Defining and defending creative processes as a legitimate form of research and scholarship is critical to addressing the perceptions of landscape educators that they are marginalised within traditional research frameworks.

REPORT

A second area of definition and defence was the disciplinary distinction between landscape architecture and architecture. Recent issues of architectural journals such as *Daidalos*, *Blueprint* and *Quaderns* have focused on landscape, and architectural practices are increasingly engaging in associated landscape projects. While multi-disciplinarity and professional fluidity are becoming increasingly significant forces in contemporary society, Robin Simpson, from UNSW, highlighted in her paper a number of the ensuing challenges for landscape educators. She asked, for example, 'How do we as educators rise to the challenge to explore a spatial continuum rather than divided territories and provide content for fruitful hybridisation?' On one hand, while the dissolution of the binary thinking associated with professional compartmentalisation might appear inevitable and desirable, Simpson is critical of the outcomes: illustrating the potential for uncritical scenographic treatments, where landscape is merely 'apparel'.

Rod Barnett from UNITEC, in Auckland, sought to remove some demarcations rather than to define them. Through describing his experience with setting up UNITEC's Landscape Unit, Barnett highlighted a need to dissolve the entrenched boundaries between the worlds of theory and practice in landscape architecture, and presented an integrated model of research, consultancy and design.

Several speakers described their experiences with programme and course design, with many common concerns emerging, frequently relating to the need to define and defend landscape architectural teaching within tertiary institutions. Diane Firth charted the development of the landscape architecture programme at the University of Canberra, and highlighted the challenges facing studio teaching within an institutional framework currently placing emphasis upon a reduction in contact hours, modularised course content, and digital delivery modes – all of which are antithetical to the conventional studio model. A recent review seeks to reinstate studio teaching as a critical element of the landscape architecture programme. Ray Green outlined the new Bachelor of Landscape Architecture course at Melbourne University, which will complement the existing Master of Landscape Architecture. The intention is to emphasise a cross-disciplinary perspective, taking advantage of opportunities to integrate with students of architecture, urban planning, building and construction students. The importance of the landscape architectural studio is recognised within the planned programme.

Cath Stutterheim and Kirstin Bauer (RMIT) outlined the challenges of teaching first year students, both within a Bachelor of Landscape Architecture (BLA) programme, and within short courses run for prospective students in landscape architecture. In both settings the aim is to introduce students to the discipline of landscape architecture, using traditional techniques applied to contemporary examples. Stutterheim and Bauer spoke of their desire to raise the cultural awareness of the students, making them conscious and critical of the landscape they live in. Sacha Coles (UNSW) also addressed issues of teaching first year landscape architecture students, using a 'spliced' rather than linear approach. Coles described how this is intended to facilitate students' engagement with the discourse of contemporary design. The intent is to introduce a formal design language of form, harmony, composition and so on, in parallel with an awareness of landscape typology and cultural theory. Julian Raxworthy (RMIT) explained an initiative aimed at enhancing students' awareness of the importance of precedent in design teaching. The Contemporary Landscape Architecture Project Archives resource has only been

established for three years at RMIT, but already has 1000 projects represented by slides and articles supported by a database.

Both Ian Henderson (UNITEC) and I looked at the role of critique in studio teaching. Henderson's experiences both as a student and teacher led him to question the value of critique as currently practised in the studio environment. He highlighted the need to explore further the nature of studio 'crits' to ensure that such sessions were of value to students, rather than veiled and mysterious manoeuvres. My presentation also sought to demystify critique, both within the studio, and of the built environment. Using my experience of a critique field trip to Auckland with a group of Lincoln University Landscape Architecture students, I proposed a user-friendly framework for critique.

Peter Connolly (RMIT), Sue-Anne Ware (RMIT), Jane Shepherd (RMIT) and Kirstin Bauer (RMIT) delivered reports on experiments and investigations in more senior teaching. Connolly's focus was on the importance of 'invention' in landscape architectural design, and provided a window into his book currently in progress. The specific issue of the anti-memorial was addressed in Ware's report on her studio focusing on the Stolen Generation – the Aboriginal children who were removed from their homes. Shepherd sought to challenge a stereotypical approach to the use of indigenous flora in planting design. Through bringing together ecologists and policy makers within the studio setting, and using models from contemporary practice, Shepherd encouraged her students to challenge the clichés of revegetation projects in an informed way. Bauer outlined her Master of Landscape Architecture (MLA) project, which sought to work with new landscape architectural tools in the design of public open space in Melbourne. William Grundmann from Iowa State University also contributed a perspective on an experimental teaching situation – the travelling studio. Grundmann recently led a group of 12 students on a three-country studio trip for an entire semester.

A conference is a useful gauge as to 'what's hot' in contemporary theory and practice, and it is easy to determine a conference's vintage by the references made. This AELA conference was notable for the frequency of references to James Corner's work. It is apparent that his writing and designing has provided a considerable stimulus for landscape educators in Australia and New Zealand. As one speaker put it, 'he's the man'. Yet, despite the alluring and seductive nature of his work, many participants at the conference reported that they have tried to take it further and found it wanting. Nonetheless, a critical use of Corner's approach had provided a useful foundation for studio work, for example in the presentation by Katrina Simon from UNITEC and the joint presentation by Jillian Walliss and Gini Lee from Adelaide University and from the University of South Australia. Both projects investigated the use of mapping in relation to landscape experience, and particularly to the need for geographical literacy. Simon designed her studio around the graphic operations used in cartography – generalisation, interpolation and copying – with these processes being used to transform the students' survey drawings. Students were at once exposed to the limitations and potentials of mapping processes. Walliss and Lee's project involved an intensive period of documentary survey prior to taking their students into an environment so remote that some places had never been mapped. They were interested to see whether Corner's seductive landscape drawings could actually inform designs, rather than their lapsing into compositions.

While many of the papers focused on the nature of studio processes and the challenges of teaching landscape architecture, two papers redirected the focus to the social context of design. James Weireck (UNSW) examined the way in which the old and new parliament buildings in Canberra, Australia's national capital, have had very different roles in relation to public protest. Weireck's analysis demonstrated the ways in which the designed environment both expresses and constrains cultural values. While Weireck tackled the macro-scale landscape at the heart of the nation, Joanne Westphal's attention was directed towards the design of a therapeutic landscape. Trained as a physician as well as a landscape architect, Westphal, from Michigan State University, offers a unique perspective upon the design of landscapes in relation to health and an individual's development. Through describing a number of features of her design for a therapeutic garden, she highlighted some important considerations in the design of intergenerational landscapes.

The conference concluded with a discussion on the opportunity for AELA institutions to join CELA with a proposal from CELA for a Pacific Rim region. As noted earlier, one of the undercurrents of the conference related to definition, and the geographical identity of this region provided a persistent concern leading up to the final discussion on CELA membership. Without any delegates from Western Australia, the meeting was skewed to the east, and in addition there were no papers from the wider region of the Pacific Rim. It was felt that the geographical expanse of the area covered just by Australia and New Zealand already provided enough of a challenge to creating a sense of regional cohesion without stretching the boundaries to include the entire Pacific Rim. Moreover, the parallels between the cultural evolution of the two countries and a relationship that oscillates between camaraderie and combat, depending on the context, was seen to constitute the required sense of belonging for a region, with perhaps not the Pacific but the Tasman Sea being the definer of place.

Coming so soon in the new millennium, amidst the pre-Olympic hype, and under the gaze of the CELA visitors, the conference might be seen as a defining moment for landscape architecture in this region. As the expression of the zeitgeist of landscape architectural education at the turn of the century, the conference represented a great sense of spirit. Against the dilution of boundaries in disciplines and regions, within the changing climate of educational institutions, there was a strong commitment to landscape architectural education and innovation. Being on the margins was embraced as an opportunity and most definitely not a constraint.

The AELA meeting provided a strong sense of disciplinary and geographical consolidation. The issues associated with landscape education have appeal beyond the region, and as a body of scholarly work the AELA papers provide a substantial contribution to furthering developments in this area. The conference papers are currently being reviewed and will be published in *Landscape Review*: a few in this issue but most in 2000: 6(2), the next edition.