

Places of Silence: Book Review

MIKE BARTHELMEH

Searching for the Heart of Sacred Space: Landscape, Buddhism and Awakening, Dennis Winters, Ontario: Sumeru Press, 2014, ISBN 9781896559162 (paperback); 9781896559216 (ebook)

Where do our ideas come from? Landscape architects sometimes ask such a question of themselves, their colleagues or their students – a fundamental question that arises from the core of our profession, from our creative response to place. It is also a question that Winters tackles in *Searching for the Heart of Sacred Space: Landscape, Buddhism and Awakening* as he explores and documents the evolution of his own philosophy and the ways in which he responds to design in the landscape.

After developing a concept for a new Buddhist centre in the Connecticut River Valley in 1984, he presented the ideas to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Winters' presentation referred to symbolic bridges between philosophy and design, expressions of Buddhist practice, the environmental setting of the centre and earth energies; all of the ideas that he drew upon as inspiration for his design. He felt pleased that he had clearly explained the foundations and rationale for the design – only to be floored by two simple questions from the Dalai Lama: 'What is the basis for this design? From where does it come; what is its source?' This book is a detailed account of a highly personal journey Winters has since made over many years to seek an answer to those questions, leading him to '... discover and experience profound relationships with landscape' (p 185).

His search took him to India, Tibet and Japan, where he attempted to uncover how spaces sacred to Buddhist traditions related to their landscape context. He found that reflecting on the essence of place began to reveal the spiritual heart of a landscape. Many aspects of these journeys, in their planning and execution, are recorded in exhaustive detail, supported by stories and legends from Buddhist traditions. Possibly the only way to read such a book is to flow into a rhythm with the storytelling rather than attempt to directly understand or grasp every thread of the whole journey or to seek a simple answer to the question. Indeed, reading as through a Taoist lens might be one way to appreciate the insights presented in Winters' journal as he seeks to reveal the silence in all landscapes.

He is at times modest in describing the emergence of his own understanding about the link between spiritual enquiry and '... the practice of designing gardens ...' (p 29). At other times he is very much at centre stage in his journey to uncover an answer that satisfies a search for the meaning in design expression in landscape architecture.

Mike Barthelmeh is an Associate Professor at Lincoln University in the School of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Environment, Society and Design, PO Box 85084, Lincoln University, Lincoln 7647, Christchurch, New Zealand.
Telephone: +64 3 423 0470
Email: mike.barthelmeh@lincoln.ac.nz

REVIEW

Winters traces the history of garden-making in Japan, follows the migration of Buddhism through South East Asia and reviews diverse traditions such as feng shui and yin–yang dualism while appearing almost obsessed with a reference to 8,631 stones noted in a fifteenth century Japanese text on garden-making. The one characteristic that ties these diverse elements together is the sense of energy flow in the landscape.

Winters recounts many stories surrounding the Buddhist myths and legends associated with place. He weaves numerous conversations with his Buddhist teachers into the narrative as part of his attempt to understand how the physical landscape merges with and becomes indistinguishable from the spiritual landscape. In some senses, this link between the spiritual world and the physical world resonates with the ways in which Māori cognise mauri, the heart, spirit or life-force of objects and places in the landscape.

Always seeking a deeper connection with landscape, Winters (p 140) describes his approach to engage with what he is seeing: ‘I generally retrieved the sketchbook from my backpack before my camera. Sketching was more effective, helping me to better understand and cultivate a closer relationship with landscape’s form and space. It helped me to see as much through my heart as through my eyes.’ This approach will resonate with students, academics and practitioners who seek to develop and refine landscape interventions that are more than superficial or pragmatic design solutions. The book is illustrated with some of these spidery sketches, supporting the notion that perception of place is highly personal and subjective. The sketches reveal aspects that spoke to Winters; their even graphic weighting produces rather flat drawings that nevertheless capture the essence of place that would be difficult to duplicate with a photograph.

His conclusions after this long journey of exploration? The book charts a series of wanderings that give the author a deeper appreciation of the need to establish a profound relationship between landscape and himself, ‘... how to be truly present in the landscape’, so that he can translate ‘... sacred landscape into form and space’ (pp 278–279). His book reveals that, for him, it was much more about the journey than the destination, as well as about the special relationship each designer must have with the landscape in which they work. He brings his book not to a close but to a pause, given that the journey continues, noting that it is his role as a Buddhist to create places of silence and give effect to ‘the unbearable lightness of space’ (p 278).