

Meaning in Landscape Architecture and Gardens

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Meaning in Landscape Architecture and Gardens: Four Essays, Four Commentaries,
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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE was born amidst a period of intense debate. During the eighteenth century, the sometimes heated exchanges between theorists of the picturesque raised many points of contention and lay down the foundations for the discipline of landscape architecture. Uvedale Price, Richard Payne Knight and Humphry Repton, among others, exchanged their views on the definition of the picturesque in distinction from the sublime and the beautiful, the nature of 'taste', and the relationships between politics and landscape (Hipple, 1957; Hussey, 1967; Andrews, 1989, 1994; Copley and Garside, 1994). Amongst the debates over the picturesque and allied categories, the question of meaning and landscape was also raised in various ways. For gardens like William Kent's Rousham, meaning was explicitly encoded into the landscape, based around the idea of 'speaking pictures' (Kent in Hunt, 1992, p 13). On the other hand, some argued that the picturesque was based upon a formal relationship between elements - 'the disposition of a various terrain, the handling of lights and shades, the perspective' - all of which are not necessarily founded upon meaning (Hunt, 1992, p 107).

Despite the vigorous debate and the fact that consensus was never reached over the theories of the picturesque, the discipline of landscape architecture has not been characterised by an active intellectual discourse over the ensuing centuries. Hubbard and Kimball, in their 1919 foreword included in their republished text, advised that 'Nearly all the trained men in the field are giving their energies to active practice rather than to theorization or writing' (1959, p vii). This view was echoed decades later by Walker and Simo, who suggested that 'landscape architects tend to be doers rather than critics or philosophers [and that] they have tended to focus on the practical work at hand' (1994, p 3). Although open to debate, such statements highlight the perception of landscape architecture as being an intellectually bereft discipline. However, in recent decades, the depth of intellectual activity is apparent in the refereed journals, conferences and publications. Marc Treib's *Meaning in Landscape Architecture and Gardens* is evidence of just such activity. Drawn from the *Landscape Journal*, the four essays in this volume present a lively argument, echoing the debates that fuelled the nascent landscape architecture discipline. Like the exchanges of Price, Knight, Repton and others, the four essays extend over a prolonged period, the first in 1988 and the last in 2007. Laurie Olin's essay 'Form, Meaning, and Expression in Landscape Architecture' was the first to be published, followed by Marc Treib's essay, 'Must Landscapes Mean? Approaches to Significance in Recent Landscape Architecture' in 1995. Jane Gillette's response,

REVIEW

'Can Gardens Mean?' was published in 2005 and, finally, Susan Herrington's essay 'Gardens Can Mean' appeared in 2007.

Simply publishing the four essays in one volume would have provided a valuable resource on one of the enduring and defining questions for landscape architecture. Treib went further than that, holding a special session on the four essays at the 2009 Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture conference, bringing all the authors together for the first time. The book builds upon the exchanges at the session and includes reflections from each author on their essays, stitching the works together through further iterations of the central arguments. Circling around whether gardens and landscape can, should or must mean, the four essays and their commentaries dissect every dimension of the 'problem', including even the definitions of gardens and landscapes. They question the 'meaning of meaning' as well as the related terms, feeling, expression, significance and communication. All of these terms weigh differently depending on your point of view – can things mean in a vacuum? Can they simply 'be'? Or is meaning only contingent upon communication, a pact between designer and viewer where an exchange takes place?

One of the surprising things in this book is the dialogue between authors. While some exchanges take place as part of the chronological sequence of the work, this can happen only when the subsequent author comments on a previous article. However, within the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture forum and the book, the authors can talk directly to one another. Usually, once an author has published a work, there is rarely a right of reply – except perhaps in letters to the editor. Once adrift in the discourse, an article can accumulate all kinds of interpretations and even misunderstandings. Thus, as well as responding to the other authors in this group, the four can also respond to other interpretations of their work. Olin, therefore, reiterates his views on the 'several ways by which landscapes come to possess meaning', something he feels was overlooked by Swaffield (Treib, 2010) in his categorisation of him as one who 'argues that meaningful landscape design should express a distillation of the essential qualities of human experience paired with a consideration of nature' (Treib, 2010, p 74). Olin reminds us that some of the elements he identified in his original article have 'little or anything to do with nature' (Treib, 2010, p 74).

The authors also get an opportunity to expand on their original points in their reflective commentaries. One of the seminal moments of Treib's original essay was his observation that a claim to significance does not excuse poor design. In what might be considered by some evangelical advocates of ecological restoration as a heretical question, Treib baldly asked 'why "restore" the original pattern when, in fact, the reserve today serves equally for human recreation and open-space preservation?' (p 92). Treib presented several possible answers to his own query, suggesting that the natural pattern might be seen to be less open to question, or that the designers believe the natural pattern to be the ultimate expression of the site and they cannot improve on it, or that it reflects the surfacing of picturesque values. Each of these possibilities prompts further thought about the act of

designing, the nature of meaning and of the potential power of any design gesture as a cultural expression. Ultimately, Treib advocated a sensory response to place as being most important, of striving for pleasure in gardens as the underpinning for design. In his commentary, he reinforces this assertion, noting how pleasure is likely more commonly agreed than meaning, but notes a dearth of intellectual debate on this topic. Perhaps a further symposium might be in the wings on pleasure and gardens ...?

Some of the most incisive moments in the debates take place in Herrington's essay. As the final author in the chronological sequence, Herrington deftly draws together the many waving threads, for example, taking Gillette to task for her assertion that 'gardens, artifacts, undesigned landscapes, and so forth do not tell, desire, or express anything. Only humans can do that' (Gillette quoted, p 190). Herrington's response to this is that 'This is akin to stating that the book of poetry sitting on my desk is simply a bound pile of paper impressed with ink, and does not communicate anything. Humans express ideas to other humans through the physical world, whether ink and paper, paint and canvas, or mud and stone' (p 190). There are intriguing resonances between Herrington's words and those of literary critic Terry Eagleton's (2005, p 85) commentary on Laurence Sterne:

... how come that these little black marks on white paper can signify human meanings? How extraordinary that a whole complex human world can lie secreted in this stack of processed rags, waiting for a reader to catalyse into life! It is akin to the bemusement that an alien visitor to earth might feel on suddenly realising that there are certain peculiar lumps of matter which don't just lie around the place like rocks or razor-blades, but which are somehow *expressive*.

The echoes between the two authors remind us that debates over meaning are still unfolding in other disciplinary circles as well, and the fusion between different perspectives can be very fruitful.

Perhaps a critical fulcrum in the tension between Gillette and Herrington is the use of the phrase 'undesigned landscapes'. One of the underlying threads of the argument on meaning is intentionality, and that is core to design. Finding meaning in something non-designed might or might not happen, in the same way as one might or might not find meaning in a word or marks not written with intent. Whether or not the meaning a viewer gains from a landscape is the same as that which a designer intended is yet another question. In that sense, it is again useful to look at literary theory, in particular, Roland Barthes's (1978) notion of the 'death of the author', which results in the birth of the reader. In landscape architectural terms, this could be rephrased as the birth of a landscape visitor necessitates the 'death' (that is, the silence) of the designer. The designer cannot assert a meaning in a landscape any more than an author can impose a meaning on a reader.

Why does all of this matter? Why debate 'meaning'? Herrington hits the nail on the head when she suggests that if we were to visit a site such as the memorial at

Ground Zero, which opened in September this year, and have no emotive response, we could view that design as a failure. But, if a memorial does nothing else it should elicit emotion in the visitor. While this raises another point of contention in terms of the difference between meaning and feeling, it clarifies the role that a designed landscape has in expressing something (rather than expressing nothing).

These four essays are not an endpoint in landscape architectural theory. Price, Knight and Repton never reached consensus and neither do Olin, Treib, Gillette and Herrington. Instead, they represent a snapshot of an unfolding discourse on how we think about landscape architecture, what the role of design is, what the relationship with a viewer is and so on. The essays are part of a conversation, and as in the tradition of Socrates, the point is not to find the answers but to discover further questions.

In conclusion, this volume makes an important contribution to the landscape architecture literature. It will be a valuable resource for students, academics and practitioners who actively address the questions of landscape architectural theory. Treib's other anthologies have all made substantial contributions to the ongoing debates on landscape architecture, with *Representing Landscape Architecture* (2007) and *Drawing/Thinking: Confronting an Electronic Age* (2008) providing a range of perspectives on the challenges for the discipline in terms of how the ways in changing technologies and philosophies of representation influence the reception of design ideas – and the design process itself. *Spatial Recall: Memory in Architecture and Landscape* (2009) is an important collection of essays investigating the unique role that landscape has in terms of remembering and tests the boundaries of how landscape architecture can take an active role in interpreting and designing places of memory. Treib's mastery is in recognising and shaping a thematic moment and gathering together individuals who can contribute significantly to the debate. *Meaning in Landscape Architecture and Gardens* is a salvo from the ranks of theory that will ensure the continued probing, speculation and informed argument that are key to any healthy discipline.

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