

SHIFTING CORE AND SLIPPING FOUNDATION: AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE FOR LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE IN EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES

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Faced with the dual and often conflicting necessity to be scientific and design practices the discipline of landscape architecture today is challenged to re-examine its core and intellectual foundation. There is a growing trend toward design as reflective practice. The discipline is maturing and needs autonomous theories and methods. Global and social externalities favor attention to landscape and landscape-based design. Landscape is not only an integrative and evolving concept and practice but also a trans-disciplinary cultural concern. Under such circumstances the core of landscape architecture is shifting and its intellectual foundation is questioned.

The core is shifting: (1) the centrality of design is suspect as design is integrated with planning and research, (2) form-thinking and art-based aesthetics is moving toward process and experience thinking and landscape-based aesthetics, and (3) a rural focus expanding toward the urban-rural integration in the name of metropolitan landscape or landscape urbanism. The foundation of landscape architecture is slipping: (1) the traditional architectural approach to design is challenged by a landscape approach to design, (2) the view of designer as product-maker is challenged with the view of designer as process facilitator, (3) the dualistic view of landscape architecture either as art or science is challenged by attitude challenging such a dualism, and (4) the Western view of the world and history has become increasingly less dominant in the polycentric world.

What can we do? We can think deep and articulate core theories and methods of landscape architecture, thus explaining the landscape approach to design and designerly approach to landscape research. We can diversify, specialize and differentiate within an integrated community of landscape architecture practice. We need to integrate design with research in a way appropriate to the nature of landscapes and landscape architecture. We can further integrate our graphic, qualitative and synthetic thinking with a logical, qualitative and analytic one, so as to remain a vibrant member of scientific universities. However, how would such trends or moves towards emphasis of research at the expense of design play out for landscape architecture in the future? Would it lose its core identity and professional relevance? Would it produce many research landscape architects with Ph.D.s who cannot design and thus with little employment opportunities? Would the discipline become a leader among the environment-related design and engineering disciplines? Or would landscape architecture be marginalized by, or absorbed into, planning disciplines or landscape sciences in the university. That remains uncertain.

1 INTRODUCTION

The discipline of landscape architecture, for it to remain a respectable academic and scientific discipline, must have its own sound theories and effective methods relevant to contemporary challenges. In this paper I argue that the core of landscape architecture is shifting and its philosophical

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and cultural foundation is slipping, and that the discipline needs to reposition and diversify itself in the face of its uncertain future.

European landscape architecture programs, relatively small in size and outside the scientific mainstream disciplines, are nevertheless subject to evaluation by scientific criteria and by non-peer scientists. They have little political clout, are not adept at political games and are vulnerable to dismissal. This is less the case in North America, where the tradition of peer evaluation is well established and where landscape architecture is positioned within a separate college or school of design. The European Council of Landscape Architecture Schools, ECLAS, defines landscape architecture as a broad discipline encompassing *planning, design and management of natural and built environment*, a discipline that incorporates diverse disciplines of art, design, science and technology. As a creative field, its leaders are usually more interested in theoretical, creative and aesthetic issues than in practical and scientific issues. Furthermore, the landscape architecture discipline has prided itself in the tradition of combining theory with practice, using the design studio as an integrative form of learning a comprehensive spectrum of knowledge and fostering creative problem solving skills.

Given the scientific nature of European universities, and the increasing pressure to become a research university, landscape architecture too is required to prove its value in the unfamiliar playing field of a *community of scientific practice*. A growing trend is the movement of landscape architecture education toward a reflexive practice that includes not only design but also research. At the same time it has to respond to the changing nature of organizational problems and the operational academic context. To successfully respond to such challenges, the discipline must collectively reexamine both its core and foundation, solidify or adapt them to the new situation, and demonstrate its own effectiveness and relevance. Under competition for limited resources and opportunities, many other disciplines are also reinventing themselves, crossing over traditional boundaries of domains. As we now know, landscape is no longer (and perhaps never has been) the sole business of landscape architects. Nor can we alone operate in isolation. We too must reinvent ourselves. Though we are perhaps the oldest discipline using the word landscape in our professional title and discipline name, landscape today has become a broad concept which crosses over artistic and scientific fields. The origin and current makeup of leadership in the European Landscape Convention illustrates this point well. On the other hand, we are at a historical moment (for at least the last four decades) where landscape architects are finally emerging from the 20th century marginalization by Modernist architects, planners and engineers, who privileged city over country and construction over conservation. We see an increasing opportunity where landscape as a concept becomes a central language, occupying a central place both in urban and regional territory and design process.

2 SHIFTING CORE

What is the core of landscape architecture? One can say, as Swaffield does, that the core of landscape architecture is design, and the core of design is theory. (Swaffield, 2002) But, what do we mean by design, what kind and scale of design are we talking about? How do the nature of landscape and the context of culture affect design theory or theories of aesthetics and creativity? How is our theory different from architecture and engineering? How is design to be differentiated from planning and management and how are they to be integrated? How is design related to research? How much value should we place on aesthetics and originality as opposed to practicality and environmental integrity? Is this core to be art-based or environment-based?

Some landscape architects claim that the central role of landscape architects is to give form to landscape. That is, design as form giving. But why should we need to conceptualize the design problem as a form problem, be it as *form-giving* or *form-finding*? Does not this form thinking mean that we are privileging appearance over substance, scenery over structure or system? Are we not placing idea and concept above the material and realization? Is not form bounded, outlined, detached, visual, immutable, closed, and final, with the association of being universal and timeless, essential, permanent, as well as independent of context or content, unchanging, transcendental, and heavenly rather than earthly? The notion of form, in my view, thus leads to closed design as well as ownership of design and to an image of the designer as individual creator. Likewise, design based upon form aesthetics would not help us to go beyond the role of cosmetic beautification of the environment. As I have argued elsewhere, form as a core concept must share its place with process and experience. Similarly, an *architectural* (formalistic and constructive) approach to design, reflective of form thinking,

or forming approach, must share its central place with a *landscape approach to design*, approaching design as contextual as well as process ordering. (Koh, 2008, 1982) And if what we are designing is about process and experience, we need a more scientific, psychological and philosophical knowledge basis of process and experience as well as cultural perspective and grounding.

The other core assumption is the idea that design is different from planning and research, therefore, differentiated and separated in terms of labor division and preferably positioned within a separate design school (an idea that this author happens to share). Design deals with qualitative issues and involves an aesthetic sensibility and creativity, whereas planning deals with policy and socioeconomic issues. But in the case of landscape planning and design the two are not as separable as are building design and urban planning. Likewise, analysis at one scale level, or one viewpoint, can be synthesis at another level and aspect. For example, an architect designing a doorknob is doing the planning for the product designer. An urban designer laying out a city block is at the same time planning for the architect who will be designing a particular building. This is all the more the case in the natural systems and dynamic landscape which have a nested hierarchy as well as fluidity and indeterminacy. Here large scale issues are not necessarily more complex than small scale issues. Cross scale design evaluation is critical. In this case the question is: does planning come before design? Besides, there emerges a need for a designer approach to the plan-making process, where the architect's ability to visualize and imagine flexibly in the creative phase becomes a useful tool for planning. This is not only because planning has to ultimately translate into formal or experiential issues, but also because these sketches are a useful tool for interactive planning and community participation. Imagination is fostered by visualization, and the choice of the desirable is influenced by the knowledge of the possible.

The relationship between design and research isn't linear or clearly separable either. Landscape architects can no longer assume that scientific knowledge is always to be provided by scientists and that scientists are capable of helping on short notice. As much as designers have understood the importance of research-based design (for this we can think of various models of design research interrelations such as those of Lang, Milburn and Brown, and Steinitz, to name a few) they now need to learn how to use design itself as an effective tool for research, particularly for exploratory research. (Lang, 1987; Milburn and Brown, 2003; Steinitz, 2002) This is to approach design as a hypothesis, with models to be tested, spelling out assumptions and expectations, working prudently with uncertainty, and being aware of the need for a realization strategy. Such could lead to a designer approach to research and a designer way of contributing to the *community of scientific practice*. Design work involves a lot of research in the form of case studies and site and program investigations. One should therefore not underestimate the value of this kind of research. On the other hand designers often fail to make their assumptions explicit or to enable their design to become a tool for knowledge acquisition, let alone to share a common definition of research. The merging of planning and design, and research and design renders the claim of design as the core of landscape architecture increasingly less convincing.

Another core has been a history-based theory of landscape architecture, a historical approach to design knowledge. This can also be challenged for its core position. The history that we are teaching is understandably focused on Western culture. As such however, it suffers from the limitations of Western cosmology, ontology and epistemology as well as its class and gender politics. In these contemporary times, we have different issues, political structures and worldviews than those prevalent in Modern and pre-Modern times. We must try to avoid the negative human and environmental consequences of Western and Modern design practiced in non-Western regions. As the world gets smaller, cities and countries around the world go for branding, and seek brand-name architects and iconic spectacles. Our theory of landscape and landscape design should incorporate non-Western views, and Eastern Asian views in particular. History courses themselves need to be globalized and post-modernized. Contrary to Fukuyama's claim, history has not yet ended with Western democracy and scientific culture. (Fukuyama, 1992) Besides, the past does not apply to the present in the midst of paradigm change. On the other hand, new scientific theories of self-organization, nano-technology, material science and systems ecology prove to be rich sources of innovative design strategies.

3 SLIPPING FOUNDATION

The foundation of landscape architecture is considered to be design, theory, material and construction, visualization and communication. Even though the discipline and profession stand on these foundations as their basic knowledge and competency, both the small size of landscape architecture programs and the pressure for research and specialization make it difficult for any program to be excellent in all these areas. One has to make a choice between selective excellence and overall soundness. The Western scientific context seems to favor selective excellence, which is contrary to the nature of landscape architecture practice. Underlying these curricula structures, intellectual, cultural, institutional and social foundations are increasingly slipping away.

Intellectually, is landscape architecture an artistic or a scientific discipline? Does the Western formal aesthetic have a sound basis? How do contemporary sciences (of complexity, uncertainty, indeterminacy, chaos, fractal geometry, nested hierarchy, self-organization, and self regeneration) affect the way we deal with landscape design and aesthetics? What kind of design *methods* and aesthetic *theories* are appropriate to landscape design, planning and management, where change, succession and life cycle are to be integrated? How can we use formalistic, detached aesthetics (based upon a man-controlling-nature cosmology and the disinterested gaze) for sustainable and integrative design and emotional engagement?

Culturally, Western aesthetics and design had been associated with high culture and have had an urban and male bias. Are those aesthetics and creativity still relevant today? How can landscape architecture based on such a foundation be relevant to a global practice with multicultural perspectives? How can we aesthetically engineer landscape to motivate caring and to raise awareness and appreciation of beauty in an ordinary environment? (Saito, 2007)

Institutionally, how can landscape architecture de-frame itself and join the community of design and scientific practices with specialization but without diluting its unique capacity of creative imagination and aesthetic thinking?

Socially, how can landscape architecture secure its indispensability and influence when we are engaged not before but after architects, engineers and planners have made critical decisions? And how can we be engaged before them when we know so little about policy tools and legal processes?

4 UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Landscape architecture today can no longer afford to retain the traditional core of design (such as the beautification of appearance, scenery making for pleasure, or the Dutch *ensceneren*) with an obsolete, exclusive and 'thin' aesthetics and ego-driven creativity toward closed design. The world has changed and so has our understanding of it. We need new knowledge, skills and attitudes to deal with new problems such as: energy and water shortage, climate change and adaptation, non-sustainable urbanization, repair of urban and industrial waste regions, urban agriculture, regional identity, bio- and cultural diversity protection and sustainable infrastructure, global equity and urban poverty and lack of access to landscape and landscape experience. In all these areas landscape architects can make a significant contribution. In almost all of these process knowledge needs to be translated into spatial decision and modeling. In this way, landscape architects can help scientists too in their research. Engaging in such works may not make us name card carrying landscape architects who produce iconic designs, but we can make an enduring impact on everyday landscapes. Our society is now waiting for such a contribution and leadership. Uncertain however is whether the landscape architecture discipline will respond to such challenges.

If landscape was ever a framed-view, bounded pleasure garden, we need to de-frame it and unrestrict our playing field. After all landscape encompasses, underlies, and penetrates city and buildings, in terms of process and our experience, if not spatially and formally. As such a landscape approach to design and planning can and must contribute even to infrastructural design.

Design practice becomes increasingly global and often involve package deals (either as turn-key, or being led by large engineering firms with financing capacity), and the design industry is now becoming big business while the majority of landscape architecture offices are small. Would there be room for such small firms in the future, when they are not properly networked?

Is there going to be little room for design and the designer in scientific universities of Europe? Is landscape architecture to shift its focus from design to planning? If landscape architecture becomes

increasingly academic and scientific, and thus less design oriented, how is it going to prepare for global scale harmonization and international reciprocation of professional licenses? Or, would there be sufficient opportunity for landscape architects in research and government? Would art and science be no longer compartmentalized, and design and planning become increasingly specialized in a community of practice? These questions cannot be answered with certainty.

5 CONCLUSION

Landscape architecture could remain conservative and defensive, or it can take adaptive action and reframe its vision, readjust its domain, differentiate and diversify. As the divisions between designers and planners and between designers and researchers become increasingly fuzzy, the real challenge may be then for landscape architecture to articulate and demonstrate the effectiveness of a landscape approach to design and a design approach to planning and research.

We need to recognize that the core of landscape architecture is shifting and the foundation is slipping as we go through a paradigm change (Koh, 1982). Perhaps the very notion of the core may stand upon our mental construct of the world as a circle with a center. A circle can be drawn with the center as a control point. But a circle can also be drawn by a particle with a tangential vector. Our world, like our metropolises and regional landscapes, becomes increasingly polycentric. In fact nature does not centralize. In a similar way, our field is increasingly diversifying and differentiating with fluid interconnections and a network of multiple hubs. Each of our academic programs takes a different position and orientation in this field, which is at once small and large. If the core in this case represents a conservative force, it is the periphery of our discipline that can be a tangential and creative force, and ready to spin off from the irrelevant center with its own hub. In summary:

The core is shifting because:

1. the centrality of design is shifting as design is becoming integrated with planning and research;
2. form thinking (with exclusive order) is shifting toward process and experience thinking, with recognition of the aesthetic and creative value of disorder;
3. rural focus is shifting toward urban-rural integration, with recognition for a *landscape approach* to urban design, and expansion beyond designer's landscape toward cultural landscape.

The foundation is slipping because:

1. the prevailing architectural approach to landscape design and aesthetics is shifting toward landscape's own approach to design and aesthetics;
2. the view of designer as leader is shifting toward designer as facilitator, enabler, a hub among members of community practice;
3. the category view of landscape architecture either as art or science, or even as both, shifts toward a view of landscape architecture transcending such dualism;
4. world views built upon dualism, linear and categorical thinking, and scientific positivism are now shaky, and must incorporate a more holistic and evolutionary view;
5. the logo-centric, object, particle and reductionist view must now recognize bodily, sensory and spiritual experiences and an invisible field of forces;
6. the Western-centered world view becomes increasingly irrelevant in the face of globalized practice and the polycentric world;
7. the practice of the designer in his atelier detached from the real world is being combined with design in the field, interacting with site and people: top-down design is complemented with bottom-up design.

What do we need to do? We need to articulate a landscape approach to design and adopt an integrative, evolving view of landscape as different from both building and city. We need to integrate ecological and phenomenological views of landscapes. At Wageningen University I have defined this as a *landscape approach to design and eco-poetic approach to landscapes*. What we are designing is not just form but system process and place experience. In our university we also try to articulate a design approach to planning and research. Our landscape architecture is occupying a position between landscape design and landscape planning, interfacing urban and rural areas. We are striving to become engaged with large scale strategic design. As such, completeness of site- and urban level design, or what we call operational design, is lacking. Such an approach is simply a response to Dutch conditions, the history of our program, and the institutional context we are in, a University heavily dominated by research and empirical scientists. Would this approach lead to long-term success for the program or discipline? That is uncertain.

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