

Landscape Architecture Education in Europe at the Crossroads

Future Scenarios - Nightmares and Visions

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Things would seem to be looking up at last for landscape architecture in Europe thanks to the European Landscape Convention, which commits the signatory states (currently 29 countries have ratified the Convention) to promote: (a) training for specialists in landscape appraisal and operations; (b) multidisciplinary training programmes in landscape policy, protection, management and planning, for professionals in the private and public sectors and for associations concerned; (c) school and university courses which, in the relevant subject areas, address the values attaching to landscapes and the issues raised by their protection, management and planning. So, it is not just the 'important public interest role' of the landscape itself that the Convention is acknowledging, but also the essential nature of the education of 'specialists'. The reference to 'university courses' surely refers to landscape architecture programmes: at last someone at the European level has appreciated the role our profession has to play in planning and design of future landscapes. Maybe things are not quite as rosy as they may seem. In fact there is no mention in the Convention of landscape architecture at all, and those who know a little about its origins will be aware that there was no involvement of landscape architects in its preparation or drafting either. Instead it is noticeable how many other disciplines are suddenly discovering or remembering their interest in landscape, be they architects, archaeologists, historians or geographers. The 'training of landscape specialists', from their point of view, could apply just as well to them. So is this seemingly bright future for landscape architecture education nothing more than a false dawn after all?

Some 40 years ago the future looked equally bright, but somehow the expectations of the late 1960s did not deliver everything which they seemed to promise. Then universities were expanding across Europe, the 'environmental revolution' was gathering pace, and new degree

programmes and departments of landscape architecture were being created. Many students flocked to the new degree programmes and for a time things indeed seemed to be going well. But, it could be argued, landscape architecture failed to build on this initial momentum and establish itself as a stable feature of the university 'landscape' in Europe.

In time the environmental revolution faded, and during the past decades the degree subjects of choice have tended to be economics or business studies rather than environmental disciplines such as landscape architecture. But with the coming into force of the European Landscape Convention, and the renewed awareness of environmental issues associated with the current global warming, landscape architecture education in Europe would seem to be at the crossroads: the chance for a revival of its fortunes is clearly visible, but there are other, less positive, alternative futures too.

This paper considers two contrasting scenarios: one is a nightmare scenario in which landscape architecture departments in Europe continue to work in isolation and in competition with one another, while other longer established disciplines slowly but surely take over the field of landscape. The other offers a vision of hope, characterised by the development of a new culture of cooperation between landscape architecture schools to improve the viability of the discipline as a whole within the European context.

The nightmare scenario: increasing isolation and competition

Looking at the situation in universities across the continent from today's perspective, certain common features can be discerned. Despite the developments of the last 40 years, landscape architecture is still a relatively new and in most cases small discipline, which is not well resourced in comparison to more traditional subject areas. It is also poorly understood by the university systems in which it finds itself. This is partly due

to its inter-disciplinarity, something which is often considered to be a strength. This state of affairs is nothing new and – as has been alluded to above – not much has really changed over the past 40 years. So, why is this of particular importance now in the current climate of higher education in Europe?

The reason is simple: the world is changing. Forty years ago universities were in a period of growth across the continent and there were enough resources to go round. But universities are no longer expanding, and – despite all the political statements to the effect that the knowledge economy is vital to the future of Europe and the need to create a European Higher Education Area which is the best in the world – in fact decreasing amounts of money per student is being invested in universities across the continent.

The market revolution, which replaced the environmental revolution of the late 1960s did not just reduce the interest of young people to study landscape architecture. It soon became not merely the external environment within which universities operated, but it began to move inside the higher education sector itself. This new atmosphere of heightened competition and market thinking now exists not just between universities but within them too.

The business rhetoric of rationalisation, value for money and focussing on core strengths can hardly be good news for small disciplines such as landscape architecture, or ones which are not well understood either by their academic peers or by university administrations. Neither is it good news for disciplines which are focussed on resource-intensive studio teaching, which requires both high staff-student ratios and far more floor space than lecture-based subjects, which are therefore seen as being much more 'efficient' in terms of cost per student educated.

These built-in structural disadvantages (quite apart from the fact that landscape

architecture does not fit comfortably into the traditional pattern of a subject area with a strong research and publication record) suggest that in the new university environment, the discipline is likely to have more than its fair share of losers. And indeed recent developments in countries where landscape architecture was thought to be well established confirm that this assessment is not an exaggeration. Several seemingly established landscape architecture programmes have been threatened, 'suspended' and even closed down by the university authorities over the last few years, while it has been possible to save others only after considerable efforts. These decisions have been taken locally at university level as there is no real overview of the situation in a European context, but the similarity of the situation facing the discipline in most countries indicates that much the same risks exist everywhere.

There are other problems too, relating to the increasing obsession with competition, evaluation and ranking within universities. All disciplines depend on the networks of their academic community to thrive, but in small and diverse disciplines such networks are only just viable in terms of their critical mass. By introducing a culture of competition, which automatically also leads to increasing isolation, these vital networks are stretched to their limits – and beyond. The end of this line of argument could be the gradual loss of more landscape architecture programmes until the few remaining – and apparently successful – ones also become so isolated and lacking the wider academic community which they require for their survival will eventually also no longer be viable and also be forced to close. And all this at a time when landscape is becoming a word which is on more and more people's lips...

So what can be done by the universities themselves in this increasingly difficult environment despite their limited resources? Is there another, more hopeful scenario?

The vision of hope: closer collaboration and a strong Europe-wide network

The answer to the above question is simple: as we lack the resources to generate the necessary critical mass in individual countries, we need to work together internationally to generate this within the overall European context. And doing so will also bring important qualitative benefits, not just quantitative ones.

The initial signs are positive: landscape architecture programmes in Europe have indeed been working together in the context of ECLAS - the European Council of Landscape Architecture Schools since 1991. This has developed from a loose association of a relatively small core of universities into a legally incorporated association under Netherlands law, and a potential membership of more than one hundred universities today.

In 2001 this process of collaboration was intensified with the establishment of 'LE:NOTRE' (Landscape Education: New Opportunities for Teaching and Research in Europe), the first Thematic Network Project in landscape architecture. This was funded by the European Union under the ERASMUS Programme. The familiar part of the EU's ERASMUS Programme is the successful student exchange programme, yet Thematic Networks are at least as important, but focus in the first instance on collaboration between university departments.

The first LE:NOTRE Project involved some 73 universities and was funded with a grant of some €127,000 for the first year. This seemed like a massive amount of money in comparison with the few thousand Euros which ECLAS was able to raise in annual membership subscriptions at the time, but the situation has improved considerably since then.

In successive years and with new funding applications, the project has grown to the current stage of LE:NOTRE TWO, which has secured funding until September 2009. It has just been extended further to involve 23 new universities from outside the EU ERASMUS area – from California to China and Iran to New

Zealand. The total EU grant which will have gone into developing landscape architecture higher education will have reached some €1.6 million by the end of LE:NOTRE TWO.

While this seems like a large amount of money, the situation is not quite as rosy as it seems. A significant proportion of this is dedicated for travel and subsistence costs for the members of the Network to meet annually, and when the costs of project management and administration are taken off, what remains of the grant to develop the discipline for the future is much more modest.

One important decision taken at the start of the project was to try and invest a significant part of the European Union grant in a way that would ensure its benefit into the future, beyond the end of the project funding. The main target for this investment has been the project website. This started off in a modest way in 2002, but has since developed into a highly sophisticated and richly interactive platform, which qualifies in all respects as a 'Web 2.0' site (even though this term had not even been coined at the time the idea for the web site was conceived at the start of the project in 2002).

Two key features of www.le-notre.org stand out: firstly it aims to strengthen the European landscape architecture academic community as an active network by providing a detailed 'Who is who' together with a wide range of communication tools in order to encourage and facilitate interaction. Secondly it makes available a series of databases, through which a unique long-term information resource for teaching and research can be built by the joint efforts of the academic community across Europe to share and make available information.

The success of these efforts was recognised by the EU funding agency in January 2007 when the Network Coordinator was invited to present the LE:NOTRE web site as an example of good practice to the coordinators of the 38 Thematic Networks in other disciplines currently funded by the Commission. Since then,

however the development of the website has not stood still, and the plans for the expansion of its features and functions continue to be ambitious.

Currently, for example, work is underway on the development of the first stages of a Europe-wide eLearning platform for landscape architecture. This is based on the belief that the activities that are today taking place at most European universities are largely missing the point and the potential of the internet in higher education. Almost all universities consider eLearning as a kind of add-on for their own students supplementing existing teaching. The LE:NOTRE vision, by comparison, sees the true potential of the internet for eLearning in being able to develop and offer teaching through the collaboration of universities across Europe in order to achieve innovative forms of teaching and learning which would otherwise not be possible.

The outcome of this process of the collaborative development of a rich internet resource, together with eLearning potentials, can have significant benefits for the future of European landscape architecture education. It can provide a response to a number of the structural problems of the disciplines identified above. By using the limited human resources we have in the European context in a collaborative way, it is possible to create a new critical mass, both to develop better teaching and to deliver it more effectively with the help of the internet. It should also be possible to release more time, both to focus on the more intense studio- and field-based based teaching which the discipline demands, as well as to do more and better research. The international perspective can both add to the richness of teaching as well as to the quality of research.

What does the future hold for landscape architecture education in Europe: problems and potentials

The efforts following from this vision are already beginning to bring positive results for the discipline of landscape

architecture. ECLAS has, for example, been asked by the Council of Europe to survey the needs and opportunities relating to landscape architecture programmes in relation to the European Landscape Convention. Invitations have also been received to take part in programmes for the shaping of a new interdisciplinary research programme relevant to landscape architecture which are currently being developed by the top European research funding agencies. But despite these very positive developments and the success of the project in convincing the European Union funding agency to continue supporting it, there are problems which are still preventing the ECLAS and LE:NOTRE vision from reaching its full potential. The sad thing is that these are problems which are to be found within the European landscape architecture academic community rather than threats from outside.

The driving force behind the ECLAS-LE:NOTRE vision is a relatively small group of people from what is only a minority of European landscape architecture schools. Many of the larger universities, indeed those which are better off in terms of resources, are not really actively supporting the project to the extent they could. Many people who one might think ought to be taking a leadership role have never even taken the trouble to log in to the project website. Without the ability to be able to represent the discipline as a whole, the weight and credibility of ECLAS and LE:NOTRE risks being seriously weakened.

One important theme of LE:NOTRE TWO involves increasing the range of 'stakeholder' groups involved in the project. One key group which has played too small a role in the past is landscape architecture students. They are now warmly invited to get registered on the LE:NOTRE web site and to begin to play an active role in building the Network (to do so look on the public area of the website to identify your school contact person and ask them to register you). It is to be hoped that students at some

of the less active European landscape architecture schools can also inspire their teachers to become more active and to help this vision of a strong European network become a reality. If this can be achieved, then the positive vision of the future for the discipline of landscape architecture and not the nightmare scenario will have a much better chance of becoming reality.

We must now make the right decision about our future direction as we stand at this important crossroads for landscape architecture education. The European Landscape Convention represents a real opportunity if we can take advantage of it, but it is also no guarantee of success, as it provides comparable opportunities for many other competing disciplines. In taking the decision about whether we will intensify cooperation or competition, the voice of landscape architecture students could have a vital contribution to make. After all, they ought to have a greater interest in the future of the discipline than their teachers given that they will be around to enjoy or suffer the consequences of whatever decision is made for longer.

Erfgoed in een nieuwe wereld

De wereld verandert en mensen veranderen. Ze veranderen hun opvattingen over erfgoed. Wat een groep mensen belangrijk en interessant vindt uit het verleden, verschuift constant, terwijl er steeds meer verleden blijkt. Elk verleden is slechts kenbaar via tekens. Erfgoed kunnen we zien als een speciale klasse van tekens van het verleden, een klasse die gewaardeerd wordt door een bepaalde gemeenschap op een bepaald moment.

De wereld verandert, maar het soort veranderingen dat plaats vindt, de snelheid, de complexiteit, de patronen, al die dingen zijn zelf variabel. Het lijkt er sterk op dat de complexiteit toeneemt, en een van de tekens daarvan is de uitbreiding van identificaties: mensen kunnen meer bepalen tot welke groep ze behoren, ze kunnen tot meer groepen behoren, en groepen kunnen snel ontstaan. Al die groepen hebben hun eigen constructies van het verleden en kunnen hun eigen erfgoed hebben. Meer erfgoed, meer versplinterd erfgoed, meer versplinterde opvattingen over de rol van erfgoed in het heden.

En dan is er de Staat. De doorgaans benevolente, studieuze, goed georganiseerde staat – althans in Nederland. Welk een hoofdpijn bezorgt die steeds chaotischer wereld de staat! Zonder staatsinterventie verdwijnt er wellicht een hoop erfgoed dat gewaardeerd wordt door velen. Maar elk erfgoedbeleid vraagt een selectie van oude dingen die om aandacht vragen en iedere selectie vraagt om criteria.

Omdat de staat onpartijdig wil zijn, dienen de criteria zo objectief mogelijk te zijn. Men zou dan proces- of inhoud- criteria kunnen kiezen, waarbij iets ouds wordt beschermd omdat een bepaalde procedure is gevolgd (bijvoorbeeld zoveel handtekeningen) of omdat een bepaalde inhoud is aangetoond (dit is dit en het is zeldzaam).

Omdat Wetenschap objectief lijkt, wordt doorgaans voor inhoud-criteria gekozen. Dan kan de wetenschapper objectief aantonen dat iets belangrijk erfgoed is, en aandacht van de staat vraagt. Verder zal deze of een andere wetenschapper graag van dienst zijn bij het aanwijzen wat er precies dient te gebeuren met de oude dingen. Iedereen heeft er voordeel bij: de Staat draagt zorg voor de burgers, vermijdt tegelijk gemor en politieke en legale kwetsbaarheid, en de wetenschapper heeft werk, zelfs met een maatschappelijk nut. Een symbiose die voor iedereen interessant is. Nu kan dit werken op bepaalde beleidsterreinen, waar grote wetenschappelijke en/ of politieke consensus bestaat over selecties, criteria, waarderingen. Maar zoals gezegd is erfgoed een doorgaans onstabiele constructie van tekens die berusten op een drijfzand van wisselende percepties en waarderingen in wisselende subculturen. Stabiliteit in perceptie en waardering is de uitzondering.

Wat te doen? Er is geen eenvoudig antwoord. En er is geen tragedie. Als we ons binnen de grenzen van de sociaal-democratie bevinden – en vrijwel iedereen in Nederland doet dat – kunnen we makkelijk een rol van Staat en Wetenschap accepteren in het definiëren, beschermen van en handelen met erfgoed, ondermeer in ruimtelijke ordening. Mensen kunnen dingen leren waarderen, een zekere mate van volksopvoeding hoeft niet slecht te zijn, en zonder staat gaan wellicht dingen verloren die later betreurd worden.

Wel denk ik dat binnen en buiten de administratie iedereen zich bewust dient te zijn van de grenzen van de objectiviteit, en van het politieke karakter van al deze beslissingen. Daarnaast moeten er ook openingen zijn om over nieuw en alternatief erfgoed te spreken, erfgoed zoals dat van onderaf gezien wordt, door mensen die denken dat de Piramides door Aliens zijn gebouwd, omdat Discovery Channel dat gezegd heeft.