

Dutch-Chinese Encounter

Chinese landscape architecture from a Dutch point of view

There is more to landscape architecture than the art of creating spaces. This is one of the conclusions that I drew after my stay in the People's Republic of China. The first half of 2001 I spent there for doing my minor thesis. The goal was to give an answer to my question what landscape architecture in China is. This article deals with the actual result of the thesis.

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When we go on a journey, we leave our home and temporarily suspend our attachment to the landscape of our every day life. By travelling we not only expose ourselves to the living of others; we become aware that other places have an intimate meaning to others just like our own home has to ourselves. The journey is an attack on our consciousness by endangering our 'habitus' – attitude and moral – by different customs, to put it short: a crisis of the ego. (Lemaire, 1970)¹

Before I start explaining what I did in China, I want to explain to you why I went to China.

The reason why I went on this journey has got a lot to do with my study period in Norway one year before. During this study period, I became increasingly aware of the many differences in perception on good and bad in designing in different cultures. As a sequel to this study period, I wanted to investigate what landscape architecture is like in a non-western culture. I chose China because of the closeness of this country and the huge and impressive developments that are going on at this moment. Not many things have been written about the influence these changes have had on the development of landscape architecture and that made me curious. To answer the question of what landscape architecture is in the People's Republic of China, I had put three questions: what are the roots of Chinese landscape architecture, what is the position of the landscape architects in China, and what do they design? These three questions also formed the framework of my thesis.

Introduction into a culture

During the search for an answer to the question what the origin of Chinese landscape architecture is, I found the first difference with Dutch landscape architecture. In China, landscape architecture has got its roots in the artistic realm rather than in engineering like in the Netherlands. By reading about Chinese religion and believe, poetry, calligraphy, painting and garden

architecture I got both an introduction in Chinese cultural life and in the basis of landscape architecture. Like all Chinese art, the garden architecture has to evoke the 'true spirit of nature'. It has to create a direct and harmonious relationship between man and nature. The image of nature in China consists of mountain and water; they stand for the sun and the moon, man and woman and the hard and the soft. These two should be connected in the complementary way the yin-yang symbol shows. When both are in balance, you will find the highest form of harmony and peace. The Chinese strove in all their art for this harmony. The image of nature led to the characteristic elements that are used in Chinese gardens. Rocks as a manifestation of yin, water as a manifestation of yang. The planting and the buildings are complementary; planting to match the natural environment and the building as the framework for viewing. Besides these four components, art forms like poetry and painting are likely to be found in a garden.

Political and planning context

After a brief introduction into the garden architecture, the next step in the search for Chinese landscape architecture was an investigation of the political and planning context. Just like in the Netherlands in the beginning of the twentieth century, there was no such thing like landscape architecture. It was not before 1952 that the first university study of landscape architecture was established in Beijing. Therefor developments in recent history have had a major impact on the development of landscape architecture. The establishment of communism in 1949 after many years of civil war and the beginning of reform with the introduction of 'the Open Door Policy' in 1978 led to great changes. This has a lot to do with the change from the communistic centrally planned economy to an economy with more



Old Chinese garden architecture



Old Chinese park architecture



New Chinese park architecture

space for free-market influences. Before the beginning of 'the Open Door Policy', the design tasks for landscape architects were mainly limited to design of parks commissioned by the government. Because of the closeness of the country very little was known about the development of the profession outside of the country and therefore was the influence of development outside of the country marginal. After the reform of the planning system, when comprehensive urban planning instead of economic planning was introduced for the first time, the growth of the economy boosted the amount of design tasks and gradually foreign landscape architecture started to influence the young generation of designers.

Projects

In the final step in my search for an answer to the question what Chinese landscape architecture is, I went on a journey to visit various projects to experience what they were like. The first two steps of my research were a great help to enhance my understanding of the designs that I was looking at. I visited various types of design that were made in different periods and I could recognise many of the things that I had been reading about. Especially in the sequence of parks that I visited, it was obvious to see the transformation that is taking place. Function and forms of the early 'classical' Chinese parks and the new parks differ greatly. The elegant and artistically shaped 'contemplative parks' are replaced by modern leisure parks with more functionalistic and geometrical forms. While looking at the projects you can raise the questions: How do the landscape architects keep the Chinese spirit in their designs? In what way is the old, traditional landscape architecture linked to the new landscape architecture. How can Chinese landscape architects design without copying from the old examples and without copying from western examples that appear in the glossy Chinese architecture magazines.

I think that the answer has not been found yet and the debate on this is too limited. One of the reasons for this is that the developments in China are going so fast that there is hardly any time for contemplation on what has been accomplished.

This also put a clearer focus on the question of what *Chinese* landscape architecture is? In both the old and the new projects that I have tried to analyse there seems to be a layer of meaning that I still can comprehend to the full. That was one of the first conclusions that I drew after not only the visit of the classical gardens in Suzhou, but also when I had talks with Chinese landscape architects. Although speaking the language of designers and thinking in spaces, the cultural influence and background makes it difficult to get to know the delicate parts of the design. This is comparable with speaking another language; although you know how to speak it to a certain extent, you are missing the details that only native speakers have. Especially poetry and humour in a culture have that feature. This proves that culture plays an essential role in landscape architecture. There is more to landscape architecture than only the art of creating spaces.

Return

Is the result of this thesis a deeper understanding of Chinese landscape architecture? The answer is 'yes' and at the same time 'no'. 'Yes' in the sense that I understand some features of Chinese landscape architecture and that I have gained a little bit insight in the problems that the country is facing and in what way the landscape architects are trying to give an answer to it. 'No' in the sense that I completely lack the cultural background that is needed to understand the landscape architecture of this culture to the full extent.

Looking to it backwards, I think that the most important reason for me to go on this journey was not the interest in Chinese landscape architecture but the



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search for my own values and attitudes. The question of what Chinese landscape architecture is, led to the question what Dutch landscape architecture is, and why do we design the way we do and why do I think that certain ways are better? My values and attitudes have been put to the test in the Chinese culture and because of that, I think that the major result of this thesis is not that I can give a perfect answer to what Chinese landscape architecture is, but a better understanding of my own values and attitudes.

When we have returned home, we will never be the naive inhabitant as we were before. By travelling we have developed the ability to look to ourselves through the eyes of a stranger and it cuts us loose from the centre that we as a matter of course had been living in. It breaks the attachment between our landscape and us. (Lemaire, 1970)² <<

Footnotes 1 and 2

The quotation is a translation by Michiel Brink from the original Dutch text. Ton Lemaire; Filosofie van het Landschap, Uitgeverij AMBO, Bilthoven, 1970.

References

Chen Congzhou; On Chinese Gardens, Tongji University, Shanghai, 1984.