

WAS LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE A MISTAKE?

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Abstract

Landscape architects and civil engineers appear to be quite different people – different approaches, attitudes, and education.

But, paradoxically, we operate in the same design zone, dealing with the public domain; we're all dealing with roads and drainage, trees and seats, and pavements.

In this discussion I take a closer look at this paradox, seeking points of interest, possibilities for reconciliation of attitudes and whether there is a way, through increased sharing of knowledge between the disciplines, of achieving a higher level of collaboration and, ultimately better and more sustainable results.

Key Words

Landscape, Landscape Architecture, Public Domain, Design, Olmsted

Introduction

The discussion is structured around a series of claims that might be made by one side about the other and which reflect major differences in values and attitudes. The claims come under the headings of Beauty, Focus, Behaviour Settings, and All Dressed Up and Nowhere to go.

Beauty

Landscape architects are only interested in the appearance of things while engineers understand practicality.

An engineer might define design as the application of criteria, standards, qualities of materials and so on, to a particular situation. For the landscape architect, design is very different. It will involve notions of inspiration, choices about style, and it will probably involve positing many concepts, only to throw most of them out.

Some of my engineering friends have been known to hand over the almost-complete documentation of a project and ask that I pretty it up, claiming with false

modesty that they have no ability in the area of beauty. Of course what they are really saying is that they are interested in the fundamental factual side of things and I should just get on with the superficial decoration.

The suggestion here is that “beauty” is something that can be added on.

Conversely, the aspiration to beauty will be always regarded as fundamental by the landscape architect.

No matter where you might place yourself on the practical/beautiful continuum, I don't think that any of us would say that we want to live in an environment that is devoid of beauty, that we don't value beauty in some fashion.

So how can the two approaches come together on the subject of beauty?

The difficulty with trying to work out what to do about beauty is that it is so difficult to work out just what it is.

What is it that triggers the beauty response?

Beauty cannot be dissociated from personal taste; everyone has their own idea of the beautiful.

And then what is considered beautiful changes over time, and it changes with place and with culture as well.

As well as having a view on what is beautiful and what is ugly, views change on what things are deserving of being beautiful.

If beauty is difficult to define it follows that ugly is too.

Sometimes the two seem to swap over, like the reversal of the poles. The classic case of this reversal is the discussion of architectural theory that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, led by luminaries such as Le Corbusier and Adolph Loos. They deplored the fact that in architecture it had become the case that decoration had falsely become synonymous with beauty. Any building, despite its function, would have applied to it classical columns and arcades, and this by the traditional architects of the day was considered the way to make a structure beautiful.

Corbusier rejected this taste and turned the proposition right around, heaping praise on the leading engineers of the time who were serving the industrialising world, working with new technologies and materials, and the new structural possibilities that they provided.

"Our engineers are healthy and virile, active and useful, balanced and happy in their work ... our architects are disillusioned and unemployed, boastful or peevish. This is because there will soon be nothing more for them to do. We no longer have the money to erect

historical souvenirs. At the same time we all need to wash! Our engineers provide for these things and so they will be our builders" (Le Corbusier, 1923)

The most useful way through this maze that I have found is the explanation put forward by Alain de Botton. He says that a discussion of beauty in design is much more than a consideration of visual quality.

"... what works of design ... talk to us about is the kind of life that would most appropriately unfold within and around them. ... To describe (a building) as beautiful therefore suggests more than a mere aesthetic fondness; it implies an attraction to the particular way of life this structure is promoting ..." (de Botton, 2006)

My second area of difference is...

Focus

Engineers have got focus; landscape architects are all over the place.

It is fundamental for an engineer to focus.

To focus hard on the task at hand, and to not be distracted by things in the periphery. It is through this culture that we live in an environment where bridges don't collapse, pavements don't subside, water doesn't run from outside to in.

This is a disciplined approach which produces a defined result and one which underpins civilisation no less.

There is, however, another approach which is one where we actually take note of what is happening on the periphery. There is value in looking beyond the stated focus and contemplating whether a broader view will include elements which might get us to a better, fuller, richer result.

This idea of lifting the line of sight to consider things beyond is a very fundamental landscape design principle.

This habit can also take the form of playing with the foreground/background relationship. We all tend to prioritise elements within the environment according to our own particular interests. An architect (building architect) will look at a plan of a town and see buildings of varied form and shape, sitting more or less on an undifferentiated background. The landscape architect (and perhaps the civil engineer) will see roads and laneways, river banks, parks, carpark lots and so on - overlain with a lot of voids which are the building footprints.

Changing focus in such ways, bringing the front to the back and the back to the front is a great perceptual exercise and one which can open up great possibilities in the design of the public domain.

My third heading is a phrase which comes to me via a famous landscape educator of the mid twentieth century, Kevin Lynch.

Behaviour Settings

Engineers design roads and footpaths that work, landscape architects just want to cover the footpath with trees and people drinking coffee.

Consider a project to design a road and footpath in a town centre, perhaps an engineer would consider the components of the construction, how to put them together, according to which standards. Lynch's thinking would, however, say that, primarily the job is to consider what activity will go on here and to design for that. So assume that the footpath is going to be a place for cafe seating, and then considerations of space allocation, shade, circulation and so on will follow.

The "technical," more construction-related aspects would be subservient to these usage ones.

This idea of the Behaviour Setting and how this landscape notion can influence

engineering practice exemplifies the productive tension that can exist between the two different approaches.

Landscape architects and engineers generally work in the outdoors, and outdoors activities can often be seen to happily occur in a very generalised setting. To consider the use of an outdoor space in great detail may be a mistaken application of a practice more appropriate to indoor architecture.

Many examples exist where you will see an activity taking place very successfully in an environment that would appear to have not been specifically designed for it – if not actually antithetical to it.

Examples also exist where a very specific facility has been created, and then totally ignored by those who it was thought would find it perfectly suited to their needs.

Lynch was writing at a time when environmental determinism was in vogue. It is less so now.

So the landscape tendency that we have learnt at the feet of Lynch and others is very positively influenced and adapted by the tenets of "practical" engineering, with the result that a "loose fit" setting is produced which is flexible and adaptable.

I like to re-interpret this idea of Lynch's as, "as much as necessary, as little as possible." The landscape/engineering collaboration builds it strong and legal, gives consideration to possible uses, but leaves the resulting space a "loose fit" in terms of behaviour.

Finally, I admit to this largely engineering audience that as a landscape architect you often feel,

All dressed up and nowhere to go

Landscape architects have ideas above their station

Was Landscape Architecture a Mistake? As landscape architects we are educated to have the broadest possible view of environmental design, and we are also led to believe that we will hold a central position in the field. Most famously, Ian McHarg, another American educator and writer from one of the great landscape schools, Penn State, encouraged us to include in our considerations whole regions, the planning of vast landscapes, and we are further encouraged to see ourselves at the centre of all of this. However, the grim reality is very different and leads to the bitter and twisted landscape architects that you might have met around the place.

Our work is often seen as a minor, indeed often dispensable, decorative art.

At the end of the day it all comes down to how much of the construction budget you are responsible for. The structural, the lighting and electrical, hydraulic, lifts and the rest will have bigger budgets than the landscape.

It may appear that the contrary is the case when you look at environmental planning legislation. It would seem that landscape is the over-riding factor when we consider the number of landscape considerations that are included in planning and approval processes. It gives the appearance of extreme green-ness, that you're out to save the planet if the legislation has onerous landscape requirements, and these remedial practices can be seen as a panacea to the environmental degradation that development can sometimes cause.

So, build that freeway or coal mine but propagate some seedlings from the forest that is being knocked out of the way. Build that ugly block of flats, but put a big hedge around it so that it can't be seen.

But when it comes down to it the money is limited. Everyone knows that the coal mine will go ahead and that "landscaping" is just a palliative balm.

Conclusion

What's in a Name?

Should landscape architects really be landscape engineers?

In my career I have designed many footpaths, roads, carparks, retaining walls, drainage arrangements - and only a handful of buildings, and small ones at that. If my design activity has to be allied to one of the "older" professions, it would seem that it has much more in common with engineering than architecture.

We are probably called landscape architects because of Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted was a nineteenth century conservation farmer who was instrumental in securing of the world's first national park, Yosemite. He turned a number of the putrid drains of Boston into naturalistic watercourses running through a network of open spaces. But, most famously he was the designer, and promoter of Central Park in New York City.

When he and his partner Calvert Vaux signed the competition drawings, they called themselves, "Olmsted and Vaux, Landscape Architects." Would my profession and the relationship between it and the engineering disciplines have developed differently if they had signed as Landscape Engineers?

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Paul is a Registered Landscape Architect, celebrating 30 years post graduate experience in 2015.

He studied at The University of Sydney and at the Ryde School of Horticulture. Immediately after graduation he undertook a one-year contract with Ashfield Council, in the inner west of Sydney. In 1986 he established his own practice, Knox & Tanner, which later became re-branded as Knox + Partners Landscape Architects Pty Ltd. The company enjoyed 27 years of operation until 2013 when Paul merged the business with COMPLETE Urban.

Paul's proudest professional achievements include planning and design work for the University of NSW, The University of Sydney, The Australian National University, and parks and town centre designs for several local governments throughout Australia.

As Principal Landscape Architect for COMPLETE, Paul is involved in major park designs, cycleway planning and design, and urban renewal projects.

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