

REVIEW

Charles Waldheim (ed.),

The Landscape Urbanism Reader

(New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006)

By Rod Barnett

Having spent some decades in the cultural backwaters of ameliorative scenography the profession of landscape architecture is currently experiencing a redemptive moment. Reduced by architecture on the one hand and engineering on the other to spending the latter half of the 20th century providing vegetative form to these other design professionals' urban projects, landscape architects are suddenly finding themselves possessed of an intellectual caché. According to Chris Reed, one of the contributors to this new landscape manifesto, we are witnessing "a revival of sorts, a recovery of broader social, cultural, and ecological agendas."¹ That this revival is taking place in the streets and along the margins of cities means there is quite a lot at stake. Urban planners, architects and urban designers have been looking after the development, the smooth functioning, and the well-being of cities for quite a while now; they're not going to lie down while landscape architects take over this influential and lucrative theatre of operations. Their ordnance, however, at least according to the writers in this book, is a little rusty.

The *Landscape Urbanism Reader* is the latest in a trickle of publications that may well turn into a stream, as landscape urbanism is definitely a fountainhead of new thinking in urban landscape architecture. It is more intellectually rigorous than the new urbanism, the movement it replaces, and more landscape architectural. The reason for these improvements on previous efforts to make landscape central to urbanism is that landscape urbanism finds both its theoretical and its operational strategies within the discourse of landscape architecture itself. It stresses dynamic nonlinear and temporal systems on the one hand, and terrain-based design protocols derived from such systems thinking on the other. Eight of the fourteen authors collected in the book are landscape architecture academics or practitioners (many are both) and the remainder are architecture academics who draw their inspiration from process-based approaches to design and urban organisation.

Editor Charles Waldheim, who organised the first Landscape Urbanism exhibition in Chicago in 1997, begins the campaign for the reconceptualisation of cities by quoting star architect Rem Koolhaas: "Landscape, rather than architecture is increasingly the primary element of urban order." Waldheim moves on to dismiss the discipline of urban planning by arguing that during the 1970s and 1980s "... planning abdicated altogether..." from the hard task of producing a 'meaningful' or 'liveable' public realm in the face of the "social and environmental disasters of industrialization."² Architecture and planning, we learn, no longer have the conceptual tools for organising the urban realm. The construction of objectified buildings and the production of bureaucratic policy and procedure are unable to deal with the emergent, open-ended and unpredictable dynamism of contemporary cities.

But landscape architecture, a systems-oriented discipline if ever there was one, can. A landscape-inflected ecology is now the lens, contributor James Corner avers, through which to analyse and project alternative urban futures, for these fields are inextricably linked.³ Ecology, the study of interactive nonlinear natural systems, and landscape architecture, an instrumental design discipline whose primary subject matter is the flow of matter-energy through differential physical regimes, are prosecuting nothing less than a war for the control of urban metabolisms.

“Adaptation, appropriation, and flexibility are now the hallmarks of ‘successful’ systems, as it is through their ability to respond to contextual and environmental conditions that they persist.”⁴ It would seem that the battle for the control of the urbanistic agenda is a contemporary dramatisation of the age-old struggle between unity and multiplicity. Architecture and urban design are on the side of the One; landscape and ecology represent multiplicity and difference. Victory will seemingly go to the discipline most able to *relinquish* control. For by their own terms the contributors to *The Landscape Urbanism Reader* regard city development as a fundamentally bottom-up, indeterminate, open-ended and bewitching flux of agents and events that are always becoming, never being. This is why proponents of landscape urbanism see design as an operational, “seeding,” instrumentalising procedure; as performative, rather than constructive. In an urban realm in which process is king, form is seen, not as a more or less permanent organising element, providing predictable and efficient channels of communication and exchange, but as a temporary way station, a mirage almost, a snapshot, or cross-section through time. No longer is the architectural object to have priority over the ecosystem-like urban ‘field’ into which it

is inserted. Instead, as landscape architect Richard Weller asserts, “the landscape itself is the medium through which all ecological transactions must pass.”⁵ The landscape architect does not control; rather conducts, regulates, guides, directs...And it is at just this point that the inevitable paradox appears. If form is an ephemera and bottom-up is best, then what of the form-giver?

Part of the problem is that architects and urban designers don’t conduct the flux. They create objects and, through the arrangement of these objects, space. They shift more or less solid elements around the city like boxes on a table-top. How, ask the landscape urbanists, can this kind of shuffling of containers “respond to temporal change, transformation, adaptation and succession?”⁶ It’s hard to see how, Linda Pollack says, when architecture is not actually “in complete control of its constitutive elements” (*but don’t we wish to relinquish control?*) and its design culture continues to demonstrate a “persistent blindness” to landscape, “failing to engage the material aspects of a site” and mistakenly “representing the ground as a void around buildings.”⁷ But formal design issues in the city are problematic for landscape architects too, surely? First, a claim for bottom-up approaches to design suggests a greater openness to the hydra-headed monster of community participation. Whatever strategies you might come up with for this, including the “gameboard” approach that Corner promotes, design by committee will always be difficult, and not to design (but to regulate or guide) is simply that: not-design. Second, what do we mean by adaptive and open-ended design? You may kick the thing off, in the manner of artists who work with organic materials, commencing the process but letting the intrinsic nature of the materials and the interaction with context actually shape production; but

design is not like art. The artist retains a high degree of control not only over choice of materials, location of making, the production itself (since there are usually no or few other participants) but also over representations of the work and its reception, as well as the intellectual framework within which the work is considered and understood. The landscape designer, however, is part of an “interdisciplinary team” with which framing, production and reception decisions are shared. And what is it all worth anyway, if you can’t stand back and say, “I did that?”, when there is no I, the doing was a response to forces way beyond anyone’s control and, more problematically, there is no *that*.

But these are minor considerations. What is at stake is a wholesale re-evaluation of how cities can be shaped, developed, understood, designed, lived in, accounted for, and experienced. The re-definition of the urban realm as a cultural and social ecology, as a living field in which buildings and trees are understood to be relative intensifications of that field and co-extensive with it rather than ontologically separate from it, has to be a good move. *The Landscape Urbanism Reader* identifies some very specific areas for consideration as subjects of the new approach. Many of the authors devote time to the discussion of transdisciplinarity, organisational formats (networks, sets, systems, constituencies), operational strategies, temporal processes and the like. Landscape architecture, then, is simultaneously nurturing the growth of the new ideas and being shaped by their rapid and timely development.

So how are these ideas to be played out? Urban surfaces are seen as “prepared ground,” flexible and open, like the British commons or the Indian *maidan*, allowing the “ad hoc emergence” of “performative social patterns and group alliances that eventually colonize these

surfaces in provisional yet deeply significant ways.” The urban surface (which is itself seen as “thickened” rather than a veneer) is thus programmed to permit a wide range of social and cultural functions, from annual festivals to casual encounters. Similar, in fact, to the idealised functionality of the 19th-century park. These metropolitan spaces, however, are not just those identified or set aside for public open space by local authorities, but are often interstitial landscapes reclaimed from previous uses. Such *terrain vague* includes abandoned industrial sites, railway yards and corridors, urban streamways and other leftover void spaces. Landscape architecture is seen as an “interstitial discipline” operating in the spaces between buildings, infrastructural systems and natural ecologies. Such a mandate distinguishes it quite clearly from urban design which is understood as a discipline that builds the formal urban structures that landscape architecture colonises and recreates.

The redevelopment of sites previously programmed for storage, parking, industry, transport infrastructure or simply classified as “waste”⁸ and therefore seen as outside the mainstream of urban morphological regimes is actually demanding, both conceptually and practically. It requires a rethinking of urban conditions and the potential roles of landscapes in urban life. And if nature is to be introduced as a regulating factor, it often requires a reconditioning of public attitudes and values. Trees in neat rows are out; messy ecosystems are in. (The former cannot “become”. Formal landscape compositions are inert, like architecture they just sit there, unable to adapt or morph.)

As many of the writers in this volume themselves admit, while landscape urbanism is a top contender in the struggle for intellectual primacy in the shaping of the 21st-century city, it is a long road from ideas and strate-

gies to real physical intervention. Many of the issues which now face landscape architects who have signed up to this manifesto are to be found in the problematics of translation, adaptation and actualisation. If the energy and wit of these writers is anything to go by, they are up to the challenge and we may yet see big changes down at the CBD, in the spaces between infrastructures and along the fringes of the metropolitan field.

- 1 Chris Reed, "Public Works Practice", 269.*
- 2 Charles Waldheim, "Landscape as Urbanism", 38.
- 3 James Corner, "Terra Fluxus", 29.
- 4 Reed, 280.
- 5 Richard Weller, "An Art of Instrumentality: Thinking Through Landscape Urbanism", 44.
- 6 Waldheim, 39.
- 7 Linda Pollack, "Constructed Ground: Questions of Scale", 127.
- 8 Alan Berger, "Drosscape", 199.

* All contributions and page numbers are from the reader reviewed.

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