

Natural Illusions: A Critique of the Ecological Values and Expressions of Some Designers and Public Artists in the Urban Landscape

DEBORAH W. DALTON
University of Oklahoma

"We must design new kinds of places, landscapes that body forth our understanding of the astonishing complexity, fragility, and beauty of the world and celebrate the new, more caring and loving relationship into which we wish to enter." Catherine Howett 1987

"[There is an] emerging 'environmental aesthetic' which indicates a shift from the aesthetics of form to the aesthetics of environment." Jusuck Koh 1988

"An aesthetic of urban design must...be rooted in the normal processes of nature and of living. It should link function, feeling, and meaning and should engage the senses and the mind." Anne Whiston Spirn 1988

"... 'aesthetics' is too shallow a notion and sustainable landscapes are too complex and pluralistic. However, creative form-giving and artful interpretation of landscape elements are necessary in order to suggest possible physical futures which are at once sustainable, tangible, and imageable to society at large." Robert L. Thayer, Jr 1989

"For landscape design to be truly meaningful, it should also give visible expression to the processes that shape the earth, thus making a connection between nature and human culture." John T. Lyle 1991

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-five years after McHarg exhorted us to design with nature and Halprin and Danadjieva produced an alternative vision of the expression of nature in the city, we still find ourselves seeking new aesthetic models that can help us both change our values and express a new relationship between nature and culture. These models should be informed by an increased understanding of ecology, human behavior and value systems as well as growing recognition of the depth of the environmental destruction our past actions have wrought.

For the past decade or so, a number of writers largely from the landscape architecture community such as Catherine Howett, Jusuck Koh, Anne Spirn, Randy Hester, John

Lyle, Rob Thayer and others have written persuasively, arguing for a new landscape aesthetic based on and reflective of ecological or environmental or sustainable principles. Howett points to the potential inherent in the exploitation of natural growth processes such as succession as well as the expression of species diversity, structural complexity and freedom of growth as strategies. Ephemerality, death, decay and disorder must be acknowledged in the landscapes we design and manage (something that present practices go to great lengths to avoid or conceal).

Thayer argues that there is a great disjunction between what we see and what we know, while at the same time we know less and less about our increasingly technological world but are more and more concerned with surface image. This leads either to opaque landscapes in which core properties of function, technology and ecology are invisible and inaccessible, or to incongruent landscapes in which surface and core properties contradict one another or are incompatible.

The shift to a new aesthetic will be difficult since it involves changes in values and cultural meaning, and can only happen over time. Marcia Muelder Eaton, in a response to Howett, suggests that practitioners and theorists will have to work in ways that enable people to change their values, that "they must provide some clues. Landscape designers who would have landscapes change by taking on new meanings have to make those meanings manifest."

Using these ideas as a framework, this paper considers some recent projects by landscape architects, architects and artists, some of which have been cited as exemplars of a new aesthetic by the writers I noted above. None of the projects in themselves is large enough to be considered an intact or functional system, yet still lay some claim to at least a different, more "ecological" aesthetic. In many I would argue that Eaton's reasonable requirement that clues must be provided has not been met.

TIME LANDSCAPE AND HOST ANALOG

Alan Sonfist's 1981 work, *Time Landscape*, in Greenwich Village, and Buster Simpson's *Host Analog*, installed in

1991 at the Portland Oregon convention Center, each excerpt a piece of nature apparently intact. *Time Landscape* is conceptually elegant and does present a different **image** of nature as disordered and perhaps untrammled. Barbara Matilsky in the exhibition catalogue *Fragile Ecologies*, describes it as "the artist's most important contribution to ecological art...a monument to nature planted with native trees and vegetation that once thrived where cities now stand.... Sonfist reintroduces nature into urban communities, revealing the natural history of places." Art critic Lucy Lippard describes it as

"an image of wild pre-colonial land in the midst of a colonized and exploited urban site. I live near it, and can vouch that it's not one of those unreal projects that has forgotten death. In winter [it]...is a tangle of brush, its beauty ravaged and hidden. In spring you watch it awakening, and in summer it's green and lush—though in some ways less interesting, more conventionally parklike."

Beyond the recognition of seasonal change and the presence of death, is Lippard simply responding more positively to a visual appearance that is messy and disordered and an idea that what is presented antedates human intervention and is thus more natural? I would argue that this is not enough.

The 8000-square-foot patch is too small to be anything about a real forest, its whole conception betraying a lack of understanding about the **function** or **system** of the eastern deciduous forest; its layered structure, interdependence between plant and animal species, its interconnectedness with its environment, with moisture gradients, nutrient cycles, and so on. The premise that over time it will succeed either as an ecological construct or a representation of three stages of pre-colonial forest is false. *Time Landscape* is not a place that can be entered or dwelled in, but is a piece of living sculpture or a plant zoo behind a fence which can only be viewed from outside. It is still a romantic abstraction since it must be asked which part of the pre-colonial forest it is—xeric upland, floodplain, north slope, east slope...? And at what successional stages...? And where is the wildlife? What to do about invasive exotic plant species more adapted to the urban environment? And so on...A far more interesting dialogue between idea, agency and process can be found in the juxtaposition of *Time Landscape* and the community garden on the same block.

Host Analog, is Buster Simpson's evocation of the Pacific Northwest's old-growth rainforests and the logging pressures threatening their existence. Simpson has planted seeds of various forest species on a thirty-year-old cut up Douglas fir log, which is intended to function as a nurse log—one of the regenerative strategies of the Pacific Northwest rainforest. It is a vivid demonstration of natural recycling processes, that out of death comes life. The framework of the mist irrigation technology visibly reminds us of the rain and fog that are critical components of the rainforest. This may be what redeems *Host Analog*, for it suffers from many of the same

problems that *Time Landscape* does as a **fragment** from a larger system that will not be able to sustain itself over the long term

Host Analog is also more clearly a sculptural piece, its cut up form and irrigation technology a vivid counterpoint to the fragility of the young, new growth. This, coupled with didactic signage that provides information about forest and lumbering processes and wood characteristic, is more likely to educate the observer of *Host Analog* about core landscape values than the romantic surface appearance and misleading expression of natural processes of *Time Landscape*. It provides more "clues" that are more honest.

CALIFORNIA SCENARIO AND ROSS'S LANDING PARK AND PLAZA

California Scenario in Costa Mesa, California and Ross's Landing Park and Plaza in Chattanooga, Tennessee use various pieces of the natural and cultural landscape as emblems in the creation of larger sculptural or landscape statements. Neither makes a direct claim to ecological function but rather to symbolic representation of the totality of a landscape. Oversimplification of a complex landscape in both works is troublesome since there is significant potential for misreading the message. *California Scenario* is a plaza designed as a sculpture garden consisting of six elements—the forest walk, energy fountain, land use, water source, the desert land and water use—which represent the environment of the state of California plus a sculpture referring to the agricultural past of the area titled *The Spirit of the Lima Bean*.

The forest walk is described in a public relations brochure rather like the entries on a chain restaurant menu: "Majestic redwoods outline a horseshoe-shaped path of flame cut Sierra white granite rising more than six feet from the sandstone field of the garden. Wildflowers and native grasses grow in profusion." When I visited it, I had difficulty reading the row of redwoods rimming the tilted slab of fescue (not a profusion of native grasses and wildflowers) as an emblem of the redwood forest (something I knew about beforehand). The perfectly symmetrical and circular mound of the desert emblem is more visually evocative, at least of a generic notion of desert—except that desert is anything but generic.

California Scenario is both opaque and incongruent. The north coastal redwoods are suffering from the pollution and require regular foliar and deep root feeding as well as heavy spraying. The stone for *The Spirit of the Lima Bean* was selected and cut in Japan. While the courtyard was originally intended as a meditation place, it experiences high use as a result of pedestrian traffic from the adjacent valet parking, and is used by nearby restaurants for wedding receptions and other events. This would suggest that it has become a successful icon, but embodying what meanings?

Ross's Landing in Chattanooga is unabashedly artificial—ne part of the plantings derived from local forest types is suspended above the ground on a ribbonlike

bridge—the public relations brochure claims that the park "documents the area's natural and man-made heritage...The Mountain Fountain and lifted landscape arch at the park's entry echo the shapes of the surrounding mountains and signal that the natural history of the area plays an important role at Ross's Landing." The plantings are from five different forest types and are supposed to tell a story which can be read by following the alternating bands of pavement and plantings down to the river. Here too, the real dynamic and structure of the forest and its articulation into different types is opaque.

Even more troubling are the behind-the-scenes, emphatically environmentally unfriendly practices that are necessary to maintain the illusion of an intact ecological system in the city. Maintenance of the vegetation is described by city workers as a "continuous, constant battle" with a range of serious pest problems calling for frequent spraying with Diazinon, liquid Sevin, Malathion, and 2-4, D. Because the archway beds are raised and there is a river breeze, spray drift is an issue necessitating early morning spraying and the use of safety cones and caution tape on occasion. The raised beds and soil compaction stress the plants—some of the white pines died because of heat reflection from the pavement and poor drainage.

Given this, how is this either sustainable or ecological—even though it creates an image of natural ecosystems? And what is the role of natural history when its emblems are literally suspended in a virtuoso expression of technological skill? It may be argued that these works serve a didactic function and provide clues for a new aesthetic, and that their obvious artificiality helps to make it clear that this is an image not the "reality". However, particularly at Ross's Landing, the visitor can also come away with the impression that it is not really difficult (or damaging) to "recreate" natural ecologies, thus giving tacit permission to destroy remaining systems—back to better living through technology and man's ingenuity. Also, James Wines is heralded as a groundbreaking "green" architect and purveyor of the new way.

LEONHARDT LAGOON

Patricia Johanson directly appropriates pictorial images of natural elements as form generators. However, Johanson lives up to the role of steward by consciously using art as a means to increase diversity and restore habitats. In 1981, Johanson was commissioned to address *Leonhardt Lagoon* at the fairgrounds in Dallas, Texas. Originally a 1930's flood control project the lagoon had deteriorated as a consequence of serious erosion and algal blooms. Johanson researched the natural history of the former wetland, identified fertilizer applied to the lawns adjacent to the lagoon as a cause of the algal blooms, and collaborated with the Dallas Museum of Natural History on selection of flora and fauna that would help reestablish and revitalize the food chain in the lagoon. At each end of the lagoon a large sculpture was constructed, one reproducing the image of the introduced marsh plant

Sagittaria platyphylla, the other the image of the fern-like *Pteris multifida*. The twining gunnite stems, roots and leaves of the sculptures create micro-habitats in the waters of the lagoon and serve to control erosion as does emergent vegetation Johanson also planted. Visitors can explore the micro-habitats up close and venture out into the space of the lagoon using the stems, roots and leaves as pathways.

The significance of Johanson's work lies in her process, its success in the thoroughness of her research, her collaboration with scientists and her ethic of stewardship and restoration. The plant form imagery is a sign and frame of reference for the intentions of the project but the form only coincidentally supports the ecological function—other forms would work just as well. Didactic signage around the lagoon identifies various plant and animal species but does not make explicit the restoration aspects of the work (at least so far as I could find). *Leonhardt Lagoon* does tend toward both sustainable function and a different, more environmentally expressive aesthetic, yet it is still a highly stressed urban ecosystem replete with litter at water's edge and energetic rats.

CHESTNUT STREET PARK

Chestnut Street Park, designed in 1979 by John Collins and The Delta Group, is a privately owned and financed park providing a cut through between two busy downtown Philadelphia streets. The forms of the park strongly recall the structural and visual qualities of the local forest—examples of which still exist within city limits in Philadelphia's famed Wissahickon park. The plant palette draws from natural plant associations. Local mica schist and gneiss is embedded in the hand made concrete pavers which are laid with open joints to permit water infiltration and aeration for plant roots; substantial space for rooting is provided and native vines cover the stuccoed building walls which shape the space; the pool (which repeats the pavers for its bottom—no blue paint signifying water here) and fountain are also designed to encourage contact with and access to the water by birds and animals as well as people; gargoyles in the fountain are patterned after the totems of three Native American tribes who originally inhabited the area, and the bronze security gates and small incidental sculptures use motifs drawn from local flora and fauna. The park was not designed intentionally as a work of "art" or as a specific statement about ecological values and imagery. Rather, the form springs from a design philosophy and approach which consistently works from local context ecologically and culturally, and consciously tends towards sustainability, or at least environmental responsiveness. This project presents an approach worth replicating.

VIADUCT GATEWAY PARK

Viaduct Gateway Park in Cleveland, Ohio is the outgrowth of a collaboration among archaeologists, botanists, historians, designers and planners to identify and celebrate 21 sites of historic importance in the industrial districts adjacent to

the Cuyahoga River. The Viaduct project, also the result of a collaboration, transformed a derelict but historically important half-acre space into a multi-level park offering panoramic views of the river and spaces for walking, eating and reflection. The space was found to be the location of the abutment for an 1878 viaduct which connected the east and west sides of Cleveland. The sandstone pedestals for the viaduct supports were excavated and restored along with the remains of an old stone wall and cobbled road bed. Seeds and breeding stock were collected from all of the native and endemic plant species on the site. An open grassy space was established as a frame for the viaduct footing and borders were replanted with the collected materials. Handwritten quotes depicting the evolution of the site were cast in aluminum and affixed to various parts of the park.

While Chestnut Street Park responds to and reflects the general context of its site, Viaduct Gateway Park is derived in a very direct and detailed way from its immediate site. Remnants of the existing natural site conditions and historical artifacts recovered from the site are recycled. Viaduct Gateway Park is not yet finished, awaiting additionally privately raised funds to complete the next phase. It also has some not yet resolved technical problems as the site is somewhat steep leaving the porous gravel walkways vulnerable to erosion. Viaduct suggests an alternative way of exposing and making explicit a buried past using words directly in the landscape rather than using signage in the traditions of the historical marker or the museum didactic label. Viaduct also expresses an aesthetic drawn equally from local natural and cultural conditions while not necessarily being sustainable.

CONCLUSION

The sub-system scale of urban spaces and places can and should overtly reflect a changed aesthetic that works with or makes manifest the processes of nature, that acknowledges the implications of time and scale, and expresses that death and life are part of the same whole. This changed aesthetic will have to rest upon new cultural and visual values, and new meanings growing out of and assigned to the landscapes we make. As we move towards this, the landscapes we design will have to inform and support the growth of these new values and meanings. In order to do this, they will need to strive towards transparency and congruency, and will have to provide overt (yet still artful) clues. Many of the exemplar projects we cite and teach from do not meet these standards. Nonetheless, they can still be useful if they stimulate debate and criticism and not simply reverent acceptance.

Urban spaces that are smaller than functioning system size are iconic and important in this educational process. It is also important that these small spaces be embedded within larger systems that themselves are more transparent and congruent. The system of production that results in the final form of these spaces is still over-dependent on the notion of the singularity of the artist's or designer's vision. The focus

on this singularity does not serve us well at two levels. One, the "famous name", or designer label as it were, is the commodity that sells even the poor imitation of the label; and second, the true singularity of the artist's vision and many of the examples cited do not translate well into ordinary, everyday places designed by ordinary designers.

I too must confess to an admiration for the idea of some of these projects such as *Time Landscape, California Scenario* and Ross's Landing, though I wonder if it is in part because the authors are famous artists or designers who in some instances have turfed out the "green" angle as it were. How much does who the author of these places influence their validity—especially if it is a "true artist" and thus the work is art and therefore somehow removed from the everyday or at least from the obligation to follow certain rules?

While landscape architects are often not as well versed in ecological concepts or in stewardship as the profession lays claim to, neither are artists or architects. If you look at the "green" literature in architecture there are few if any references to the writers and thinkers I have mentioned, much less scientists. Indicative of a limited understanding of ecological process are references in Matilsky's book to Sonfist's tangle of "unspoiled vegetation", and that Sonfist is "planting forests of trees and shrubs." Both terms have more to do with cultural or horticultural ideas about the elements of nature. Few art or architecture critics are particularly well informed either and are often still under the sway of 18th century aesthetic notions and/or modernist notions of nature.

During roughly the same twenty-five years I referred to in the beginning, artists moved out into the landscape and the public art movement underwent a rebirth. Public art processes have influenced and supported artists in their explorations in the landscape and the public realm, protecting their mandate as artists to explore ideas in ways that have not necessarily been available to landscape architects or architects. However, part of this iteration of public art processes has been a strong emphasis on collaboration, not just between artists and designers but increasingly with other disciplines such as historians, archaeologists, ecologists and other environmental scientists, which has provided new partnerships and forums for the development of alternative aesthetics. As genuine collaborations among broad-based groups of artist, designers, scientist and humanists proliferate (if they continue to do so), the probability increases that we will have work that is transparent, congruent, and successful in supplying clues to reconnect a culture disconnected from its home ground and itself.

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