

Sustainability, Sensibility, and Delight

Sampling and Specificity: The Urban Landscape

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Contemporary urban landscape design is frequently aesthetically disappointing, of limited interest or use, and denying of possibilities for future change or maturation. Urban land is almost always the focus of multiple demands and economies, and is likely to be invested with particular and rapidly-shifting significance and value. In particular, models of contemporary urban landscape design do not make use of rich and varied research data coming from sources outside of the design professions.

Sampling of this data, makes possible the use of specific information. This specificity allows for a greater clarity in the definition of design parameters and options, and may indicate potent possibilities for cohesive landscape design proposition.

This paper seeks to address the potential of sampling and thereby increased specificity, as a means to further effective urban landscape design. A student project, ON SITE, is described as illustration.

Effective urban landscape design is here defined as design that embodies elements of sustainability, sensibility and delight. This implies an ongoing renewal, appropriateness and the perhaps more ephemeral or serendipitous, subjective experience of delight.

Where landscape is seen as an expanse or terrain visible from a particular place or direction, there is implied a superficiality or vastness. There is a need to be selective in order to be effective.

Sampling is a means of selection.

An **urban site** in a city is a **sample of that city**.

Any **response** to that site is a **sample response**.

Any **proposition** for that site is a **sample proposition**; and

Any **communication** of a response, is a **sample of communication**.

URBAN SITE

There is value in considering the urban site, the area defined for design intervention, as a sample. The delineation of a

'site' either for a building or group of buildings or for a highway, street or park- is generally one in which the boundaries are determined historically, by landownership. Land is subdivided — and further subdivided, removing the traces of arrangements that respond to topographical and climatic conditions. Agglomerations of smaller parcels into larger groupings are likely to be separate from a physical condition. Yet design is, at least in part — a physical manifestation on a given site.

The site as sample, implies a broader 'grain' — the wider brush stroke appropriate to a landscape — geographically defined as 'a tract or region of land with its characteristic topographical features, especially as shaped or modified by usually natural processes or agents.' Sampling may imply a landscape revealed. An intervention may thus acknowledge a broader context.

RESPONSE

A city-sample-site seen in the context of the stated parameters of sustainability, sensibility and delight may allow for a quiet response where all of the action need not take place within the site boundary. But the site is also addressed from the inside, the ground plane, fabric or canvas, rather than as a function of its edges or frame. This seems to offer 'breathing space,' allows for a greater breadth of possibility, than the insular study of a particular site might suggest.

PROPOSITION

There is the opportunity to consider the least intervention—that is to leave and do nothing, or to make one simple proposal—such as, that of one continuous surface. It is possible to consider a highly complex intervention or many options between. It is worth noting that the most simple proposition could also be the most radical. The simple proposal is often the most difficult to justify.

In any coherent landscape proposition there is a scenario of care.

There is also the opportunity to propose that the most interesting possibilities exist outside the given site boundary or urban area. In a city-urban area, priorities and demands are

always complex and overlapping.

The sample proposal can be inserted rather than overlaid more appropriate than a traditional schematic or masterplan. There is implied an experimental stance — perhaps a dynamic — the possibility for change and transformation

COMMUNICATION

The discipline of sampling, which may include randomness, exerts a rigour. It can allow for recording, and importantly-monitoring, the anticipation of future change. The superimposition of a grid of reference points facilitates precise identification of the sample and also allows the selection of an appropriate grain or scale of consideration.

The possibility exists, not only for observation and recording — but also for the revisiting and monitoring of a key area or site, for instance, for ecological assessment and the evaluation of change.

There is a discipline involved with the expression of sample data. And the specificity of the sample can be helpful in the proposition of precise strategies, rationale and cost comparisons.

The vocabulary of a sample may be more pointed than that of an expansive narrative. Perhaps the subjectivity of much landscape evaluation is in itself a drawback to wide communication.

Sampling is not of course limited to the spatial, physical or horizontal. Vertical cores drawn from substrate and used by soil scientists and mechanical engineers may be extended upwards to include air quality or air movement.

The fluidity of landscape — through moments, days, years, millenia, is fundamental to potent landscape proposition.

A sample can be repeated through time — with anticipation of the future — and reconstruction of time past — as with computer simulation research relating to longevity and diversity of plant communities. This suggests a process, rather than product-led specificity. Maintenance and management strategies and their projected term, have more vital significance than a simple delineation of surface finishes and planting.

The communication of these samples as stills or animation, reflect the theatre of possibilities. The harnessing and direction of inevitable change in landscape — suggests a narrative of ongoing engagement, perhaps through many years- themes of nurturing and husbandry, equilibrium and stress, alongside those of responsibility and monitoring.

The quiet option, the anticipation of flux and fluctuation contrasts with the speeding up of other urban functions. The involvement of specialists with particular empirical data is facilitated by a more specific enquiry. Sampling can supply a common focus for debate. In teaching as in practise this focus elucidates.

SAMPLING AND TEACHING

Each sample is seen as one of a greater number of possibilities. The selection of the sample is of clear signifi-

cance. Selection may be random, or it may be highly controlled. There may be one, several, or very many samples. As teacher and practioner one can guide or direct selection. Selection can be based on experience and, or, intuition.

Once defined, the sample can be investigated in the knowledge that through the sample window a much larger volume of knowledge is being accessed and observed. With more samples, the wider possibility is being revealed. This obviously has both physical and non-physical connotations.

In attempting to gain more precision or depth in a restricted field of view, the specificity of information that is available about almost all facets of landscape, is revealed, as is the range of specialists who are working in particular and often insular research programmes. Their vocabulary and priorities can take the dialogue beyond the superficial.

Armed with more precise information, and having taken measure of a sample, it is possible to make an intuitive leap -to a proposal that transcends the information revealed and observes a range of possibilities for any given site or intervention. At its best, this leap would propose a rich condition or connection made possible by the exposure of a fresh potential.

ON SITE

A group of architecture students from the School of Architecture and the Built Environment, at the University of Humberside, Hull, UK, was asked to explore existing conditions and possibilities for the court at the school/street interface. The project was part of a three-day landscape design workshop running in May 94, entitled ON SITE. The project explored the pedagogic potential of sampling, in a literal way.

Having themselves generated a small budget, students decided to experiment with particulars for the given city-sample-site. At first a transect was set up across the site, with observation and intervention along its length. Later, a grid of squares across the whole site allowed for a wider choice of samples and responses. Individuals were invited to adopt a sample city square for 2 days and to make some intervention therein. An event in the court marked the culmination of the project, and a feedback session revealed findings. Issues of **scale, intervention, dynamic, literacy, and aftercare** were each discussed.

Scale

A two metre grid square was established. This fitted appropriately needs for footpaths and bicycle parking. A one metre grid had looked inappropriately fine. In considerations of landscape design, it is possible to imagine a situation where a sample area might be hundreds of kilometers square or the size of a footprint, or smaller still. A sample community might be made up of one or a thousand units.

Intervention

The consideration of choice of intervention, revealed explicitly the option of the least intervention- maybe not even to

place a foot upon it. This then provoked discussion of protective strategies. Other options included the digging of soil otherwise untended, the reshaping of profile or landform, planting or paving- in this case with potplants on loan from the horticultural college or 'paving' with sand — a temporary expedient. The square could be chosen as the site for a light or a seat. There was the possibility of continuity or contrast with adjacent squares.

Dynamic

Particulars of time throughout two days and a night of varying light conditions, temperature and use, were observed and monitored. Students stayed on site through an extended period of time, or visited their square frequently — in order to sample the changing conditions of the site. *There are no two more different sites than the same under altered skies..* Mozley. Reflections from a constructed pool of water fluctuated throughout the day.

Literacy

There was discussion that focussed on planting — the choice of species, habits and planting distances, expected growth and vulnerability. There was dialogue with the estates department responsible for the maintenance of the court-discussion of the particulars of drainage and refuse, mulching, weeding and herbicides. Borrowed plants were pot-grown and would have been appropriate for planting. Sunflower seeds were sown.

The Hull City Arboriculturalist was consulted about the condition of existing trees. Pruning strategies, such as crown-lifting, were proposed in areas where dense shade prevailed for much of the day. Some squares were found to be surprisingly inhospitable and uncomfortable for protracted visits. Interventions like low cardboard walls, provided shelter from the wind and were comfortable areas for sitting at lunchtime and through the afternoon, their flexibility proved useful.

Aftercare

It became clear at the feedback session that the future scenario for the court depends largely on the viability of aftercare — not just the proposition of a convincing scenario,

but the commitment to it, of those charged with this responsibility.

A group of students decided to take the exploration further and have endeavoured to develop a coordinated project for implementation. Their efforts have been frustrated by a lack of resources and commitment to provide for the specifics and flexibility of aftercare that their proposition demands. It is hoped that with consultation and changed patterns of responsibility new possibilities will emerge.

ON SITE reveals aspects of landscape design which are particular to it, such as, the scope of scale and the ranges of intervention possible — where natural regeneration of a disturbed site may suggest only the holding off from intervention.

ON SITE demonstrates the inherent dynamic of the site, where every design proposition demands a complementary proposition of care and aftercare. Exposed also is the need for a level of literacy to facilitate debate. In restating as objective the embodiment of elements of sustainability, sensibility and delight- these may be seen in some part within the project. Existing trees were retained though their forms were modified. New beech trees were planted. It was possible to intervene in the regular cycle of herbicide application on the site, an intervention of sensibility. Delight was temporal -the transient activity and dappled sunlight. The value of creative maintenance and management strategies was explicitly demonstrated. Students perceive a need for experimentation.

There is no quick fix, no polite panacea, nor applique embellishment which addresses the fragility and specificity of site. A focus of economic, physical and intellectual resources is needed for the realisation of innovative urban landscape design-landscape design which embodies elements of sustainability, sensibility and delight.

Sampling and specificity of information, and thereby interdisciplinary debate, experimentation and refinement, will have a part to play...

NOTES

Mozley Univ Serm 1896
Brown unpublished paper The Environment of Change 1994
Oxford English Dictionary 1994