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## Design of the Urban Landscape

Laurie D. Olin

to be done by the local staff, was the prospect of clear plans and proposals for design that might eliminate all those costly knock-down, drag-out fights over individual projects. In essence, that two-year undertaking was a plan to deal with the physical form and design of the city. It dealt with a lot of things that were clearly of concern to the people and some that the planners themselves knew to be important. Its subjects were the appropriate height and bulk of new buildings, views, color, preservation of historic buildings, city-wide landscaping and lighting, open space, preserving and honoring the natural environment, ways to ensure that new development fit in with the old, traffic at local, neighborhood levels, and more. The plan was clear, easily understood, attractive, and backed by a lot of very thorough, highly professional work. Perhaps more important, key elements of the plan could be easily translated into very specific legislation.

The plan met with overwhelming success and support. Indeed, the people's response was to challenge the planners to make the plan a reality, to follow up. Within a year, very specific citywide height and bulk legislation was passed, as were historic district designation and measures to prevent those plastic apartments. Rezoning also followed, and two years later the voters passed a major continuing funding proposal for open-space acquisition and development called for in the plan. This, too, was a measure initiated by voters, but one to implement a publicly prepared plan. For some

years citizens brought their copies of the plan to meetings and were not beyond quoting it, chapter and verse, sometimes to the chagrin of those who had prepared it.

The Urban Design Plan did not solve all of the city's design-related problems and concerns. Solving one problem can reveal others. Newer, more sophisticated plans have been necessary to deal with design issues that are directly related to people's comfort and safety, such as ensuring sunlight on sidewalks at the most important hours and slowing traffic at intersections. There is a more highly refined plan for the downtown, one in which design plays a major part. San Franciscans have voted on these matters, too, just as they have started to vote on measures related to the ultimate size of the city. Increasingly, we see citizen initiatives on physical form and growth questions in other cities as well.

To be sure, this matter of the physical form of the city, its design, is not of equal importance to the people of all cities. To some cities, such as San Francisco, it would appear to be constant and continuous, though one might wonder where the concern was in the 1950s. In other cities design is a sporadic issue. For still others, it may not be a concern at all or is lying dormant, to be set off unexpectedly.

When and where urban design is an issue, though, it can be very powerful, a matter of considerable passion, and certainly it will be played out in the political realm.

Landscape design, put simply, is the design of land for human purposes. It includes shaping the earth, manipulating land-form and its surfaces, shaping spaces, creating rooms outdoors, and using plants and architectural elements—all to form environments of various kinds.

At its simplest, landscape design consists of three activities. First is conservation, which has to do with what's there, what should be saved and what should go, and how to husband resources. Second is editing, which has to do with how to move things around: this would be nice, we'll keep it, but we'll move it over here. Then there is that troubling, terrible, most difficult part, invention: bringing to a place new things that have not existed there before.

The palette that we work with in our parks and gardens, in our plazas and squares, in our cemeteries and sacred groves, through time, is a very simple one, and very old-fashioned: just stones and earth, a few plants, water and the sky, things like that. It's a very archaic business: the construction methods are primitive compared to the rest of our society. We don't use titanium; we don't do strange welds with electronic devices. Yet it seems our choices are almost limitless.

Landscape design has, in the hands of its greatest practitioners, embraced the spectrum of human emotion and embodied the whole range of our aspirations, from delight and humor to ceremonial splendor, grief, and the honorific.

One of my favorite places is the Park of Sceaux, a French chateau now swallowed up by the suburbs of Paris. Here one encounters a very formal landscape, of Lombardy poplars planted in rows along a canal. Although it was built for people who held great power and maintained dictatorial control over their fellow men, today it is a people's park much delighted in by contemporary society. The order and structure of this landscape possesses a beauty and power that transcends its origins and enhances the life of everyone who uses it, whether they be ministers of a king and his court, or a couple of blue-collar guys fishing for pike on their day off.

The so-called informal or natural style has caused great confusion because it is really an invention, an artifice and an unnatural phenomenon. Parks designed in this style are gracious in their accommodation of our behavior; they provide rich and pleasurable settings for our lives, for courtship, for recreation, for rest and conviviality. They are so skillfully done that we believe they are natural, or assume they always had been there; we forget the effort that went into their making. So too with the restructuring of cities all over the Western world in the nineteenth century, the invention of the public realm as we know it. We forget that those great public works are really designs; we assume them.

Landscape design is an activity that can range from regional planning on the one hand, to the design of detailed parks and gardens on the

other. Landscape design has helped shape spaces that are shared by all of our citizens—what we call the public realm.

What would our cities be without parks? Their creation is one of the most optimistic acts of our society: the desire to bring natural elements into the heart of cities for health and for other social benefits is something that we find in the work of our nineteenth century ancestors. Our parks were created at enormous cost and with great energy, and often from leftover, marginal lands and wastes at the edge of cities. You couldn't go to social scientists and come up with a program for Central Park—Olmsted and Vaux invented it. There's a generosity of spirit, a social vision; not mere nostalgia for a lost pastoral era. There was a can-do attitude on the part of the city planners and politicians of the nineteenth century, who built most of the great public works that make New York habitable today.

It was Olmsted and his colleagues who further developed the concept of regional planning for park systems. Their famous Emerald Necklace in Boston exploited the characteristics of the region and linked communities and very disparate land uses with an interconnected network of roads, parkways, parks, preserves, forests, harbor islands, etc. It was a phenomenal invention, ahead of the urbanization that eventually infilled the entire region.

As cities grew, the forces at work became gargantuan, the errors

became more drastic, and the swings of natural forces moving through urbanization became more pronounced. Landscape architects concerned primarily with ecological issues began developing larger scale techniques that were less whimsical, less personal, less idiosyncratic, and more replicable. Ian McHarg, for instance, asked questions about where we should build and how we should conserve particular resources and how to maximize opportunities not only for development but also for the perpetuation of whole ways of life.

This generation of landscape designers started with the notion that the professional's first responsibility is to the citizenry, with the obligation to preserve life and to enhance the community's ability to function. In the last 20 years or so, there has been a great body of work concerning land and the conservation of land, which is, I think, profound—one of the achievements of our time. The Environmental Protection Agency, its requirements, and that entire list of things that our citizens now demand of their government in terms of the quality of the environment are fairly recent inventions.

Landscape design consists of many different activities. What differentiates it from other design disciplines is its focus upon the use and manipulation of natural phenomena and elements, of plants and people, of living things.

For instance, a large measure of the suburban dream we have created



lies in the foliage of these environments. Riverside and Oak Park near Chicago; Beverly Hills, Westwood, Santa Monica, and Malibu in Los Angeles are desirable not so much for their architecture or roadways, but for the landscape and vegetation that has been carefully built up and planted about them, maximizing the illusion of benign and encompassing natural surroundings. Part of the appeal is that natural materials keep us in touch with the cycles of nature, giving us pleasure in their visual and sensual properties of color, light, texture, form, and smell and in the reassurance of both their continuity and their change.

Yet my assertion is that landscape design is not a perfume that can be added to a project after it's done. It's much deeper. It is intrinsic in the planning of a project, in the arrangement of the parts, and in the grouping of elements. Landscape design has to do with the proportion of spaces between buildings as well as the shape and the dimension of streets, with the layout of circulation, and with the positioning of buildings in space—the positions they take toward the world and toward one another. In the design of the spaces and how one moves through them, you orient people to where they are and how they feel about other parts of the city. If part of architecture concerns the relationship between individuals and society, part of landscape architecture concerns the relationship between individuals and their environment. If architects struggle with problems of permanence and creating things that will be last-

ing, landscape architects have to understand things that will be perpetually in motion and changing and dying, with lives of their own.

How do these ideas translate into the urban context? The same issues apply: understanding the place where you are, what time it is, the relationship to the surrounding fabric, to historic elements, to landmarks, to important social or cultural activities. You rely on the same activities of conservation, editing, replacement, and the introduction of elements, some of which may harmonize with, and some of which may be in contrast to, what already exists. Where you are and the nature of a place are two things a good designer always tries to understand about landscape problems.

Let's take streets. Streets may be the most important open spaces in our cities, yet they often are hideous. A few years ago, our office participated in a collaborative effort to create a transitway along 16th Street in Denver. There were two harmonious goals. One was a transportation goal—to improve movement within the city and access to the downtown core, to give a quality ride so people would not use their cars. The second was an urban design goal—to give downtown some sort of urbanity, to make a thing that was 12 blocks long and 80 feet wide into a *place*, a park. Could a street in modern downtown America be beautiful? Could it act as a promenade, a place of refreshment, a place of social interaction?

Of course, the answer was yes. We decided to do very little, to empty this space out, to see it fresh. We loved the buildings; we didn't want to obscure the buildings. We needed the transportation; we wanted lots of people. We thought, make it simple, and then let the people decide how to live in it. So we did something very simple. We made a paving pattern, wall to wall, end to end, just like a great carpet. We placed trees, very simple, that alternated with lights; we scattered loose furnishings out and let people push them around. The story since is that several hundred million dollars worth of construction have developed alongside of it. Local downtown organizations now tax themselves to maintain it and have hired extra people for the task. It is immaculate; there are now restaurants and cafes and so on.

A wealth of beautiful buildings does not alone create the ambiance of the major cities of Europe. Great works of architecture grace the most highly regarded of these, but they are exceptions; the special architectural event is not the norm. What distinguishes these cities is their arrangement and the exterior spaces. Buildings are used to make spaces, not to usurp and occupy them, and the spaces that result have been planted and paved with great care. The fabric of these cities is calm, normal, practical, and suited to human needs and comforts. Their urban spaces provide shade in the summer, sun in the winter, protection from rain, and ample places to enjoy views of people.



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It's proper that there be public debate about the design of public space in a democratic society, because how we choose to apportion amenity in the public realm is a matter of debate. Landscape architects shouldn't be surprised when they discover everything they do turns out to be political, in that someone loses, someone gains. But it's hard to get it right sometimes, hard to please everyone; we just can't.

Today, in Manhattan's Bryant Park, we have been engaged in a four-year process of public debate, which I think is proper, over the reconstruction of the park. We are working on a scheme to deal with what in some ways is a restoration; there's some rearrangement of parts, some demolition, we're eliminating some things, and there will be new elements introduced. It's all controversial. And it's important—this space is very important to New York—that we do somehow get it mostly right.

This space has a great sacred grove: overgrown, and in many cases sick plane trees that we have to take care of somehow. In the middle is a great lawn, essentially the mid-day beach of Midtown. It's a sanctuary in the middle of towers, a marvelous sunny spot, a pleasant lunching and assignation place. It's a place for gregarious activity.

Out on the Fifth Avenue side of the New York Public Library, which sits in this park, we've managed to get through all the committees and reviews and managed to tear down

everything that was there except a railing, cut down all the trees without anyone noticing, and totally rebuild it, reorganize it, rearrange it. I think we've actually rescued the front terrace from drug dealers and from social malaise. At this moment it is a completely redesigned space (hardly anyone seems to have noticed), and there is now a cafe terrace of popularity and a kind of benign spirit on Fifth Avenue—the best cappuccino outdoors that I know of in Midtown Manhattan, and superb food.

Some years ago J. B. Jackson wrote that every American is entitled to an environment that is biologically wholesome, socially just, and spiritually rewarding. My colleagues and I have been concerned to do this in urban environments, because that's where Americans live today. Yes, we are suburban, but we aren't rural, we aren't agrarian, we are urban in some strange and wonderful way. The problem is how to respond to the needs of this new urban America, both as a group, and as individuals.

Landscape design is about a lot of things. It allows us to take people out of their routine. It tells you where you are and allows you to act out something about your own character and your own nature. It gives people the stimulus of society and the tranquility of themselves and access to natural phenomena in the heart of our urban creations.

This is really what landscape design is all about.