Peer Reviewed

Title:
The Inhabited Landscape [The Inhabited Landscape: An Exhibition]

Journal Issue:
Places, 4(4)

Author:
Howett, Catherine

Publication Date:
1988

Publication Info:
Places

Permalink:
http://escholarship.org/uc/item/1dc1w5dg

Acknowledgements:
This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe visit www.places-journal.org. For reprint information contact places@berkeley.edu.

Keywords:
urban, design, architecture, landscape, inhabit, exhibit, garrett, eckbo, catherine howett

Copyright Information:
All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author or original publisher for any necessary permissions. eScholarship is not the copyright owner for deposited works. Learn more at http://www.escholarship.org/help_copyright.html#reuse
Catherine Howett

I was struck, in rereading the statements that accompanied the projects submitted for consideration in "The Inhabited Landscape" exhibition, by a passage in Garrett Eckbo's letter to Frances Halband. He said that he believed that his own submissions reflected the theme of the exhibition.

"I believe they all exemplify, in various ways, your concept, which has been a driving force in my work for fifty years, "the integration of architecture and the landscape... is absolutely central." In actual practice this rarely happens through direct, one-time, equal base collaboration. Usually architecture/construction is there first, actually or conceptually. The landscape elements must adapt to, grow from, and extend the architectural/structural concepts (whether or not they seem to lend themselves to that), and establish connections or separations between the project and the surrounding neighborhood and region. The environment is littered with impossible tangles which have resulted from the absence of thought about this end product of each development project. The environmental art of the future will be kept busy trying to untangle such messes. The occasional one-to-one collaboration— I have had some— serves as guide and beacon." Eckbo articulates here his impression of what the focus of this exhibition was to be, an impression that I shared but about which there was some disagreement among the jurys. He makes the point that historically the design of buildings most often literally precedes—and from that, takes precedence over—the design of the larger environment of which the buildings will ultimately be just a part. He clearly favors an alternative approach, in which considerations of the total site's existing and potential character are addressed from the beginning of a design process that gives equal importance and priority to architectural and landscape values. This distinction is more profound than simply the question of who works with whom at the various stages of the project. Eckbo makes the point that in the right kind of design process the character of the site actually shapes the decisions that determine building form, instead of having to respond afterwards to the "architectural/structural concepts." His reading of the criteria for the exhibition reflects my own original understanding, and I think the jury's disagreement about the meaning of these criteria was hardly a minor matter, but rather a significant schism that must be taken into account in any effort to interpret the exhibition.

Perhaps my response to one of the projects will make clear what I see as a critical uncertainty in the selection process that has made it impossible for me to evaluate what the sum total of the projects chosen actually can tell us about contemporary approaches to the design of the "inhabited landscape." Turner Brooks's Sheldon House in Vermont is useful in this way. Nothing in the architecture of this house seemed to me particularly responsive to the nature—big "N" or little "n"—of the Vermont sheep farm in which it is set, except perhaps that its wood-frame construction reflects a regional vernacular. On the contrary, Brook's accompanying comments underscore the fact that his Vermont houses deliberately aim for the look of a "nervous" architecture that "always seems to be sliding across the landscape in the form of steamboats or some other form of vehicle." A comment on his work that appeared in Architectural Record makes the point that "the hint of potential mobility" in such houses "reflects the nature of their inhabitants, many of whom are transplants from city or suburbia, or only part-time country folk." How well the Sheldon House succeeds as architecture is not at issue here; its failure to accommodate its forms to the existing landscape, so that one has the sense that the house might have been built on another site in almost the same way, makes me question its viability as a model of building/landscape integration.

Another residential design, Antoine Predock's Fuller House in the Sonoran desert of Arizona, offers a good example of a contrasting approach. Here the desert environment, the specific character of the place—its topography, geology, vegetation, climate, etc.—has determined the forms of the building, so that "the line of demarcation between the house and..."
the terrain becomes ambiguous.” The domestic activities to which
the plan of the house responds
are physically and symbolically
merged with the surrounding
natural and cultural world; one
views the sunrise from a special
pavilion above the breakfast
room, the night lights of Phoenix
from “the stepped exterior of the
pyramidal den.” This house seeks
to enter the desert reverently,
mindful that what millennia of
adaptive natural processes have
produced is as vulnerable as it is
precious. The aesthetic that shapes
its forms is born out of a desire to
make life on the desert participate
in the life of the desert.

The two other residential land-
sapes in the exhibition provide
a study in contrasts from another
perspective: the Reed Garden by
Eisenman Robertson Associates,
and the series of courtyard gardens
for Ceres Farm by Tori Thomas.
The Reed Garden is unquestionably
beautiful, but fails to move beyond
or to transform in significant ways
a retardataire style associated with
the design of early twentieth-century
country estates. Tori Thomas’s work,
on the other hand, playfully mar-
nipulates historic styles and themes
in a search for transformations that
seem, in their freshness and vitality,
to belong absolutely to the present,
although a present that admires and
loves the past. That spirit, it seems
to me, represents the best impulse
of our bemugged Post-Modernism.

Several of the projects in the exhibi-
tion demonstrate a keen sensitivity
to the fact that the history of a site
often becomes one of the most
important of the landscape “givens”
that new design must address. The
Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory
Waste Water Treatment Plant
(Centerbrook Architects) offers a
model for introducing high-tech,
industrial processes into a visually
and ecologically fragile landscape
harmlessly, in the best sense of that
word. Jones & Jones’s Gene Conlon
Beach Park is similarly modest in its
approach to creating a public park
on a mile of Lake Washington
waterfront that had been an
industrial site. The design draws
upon the vernacular building
tradition of mills, shipping and
storage facilities and reminds us
of the history of the place with-
out lapsing into quaintness or
gimmickery. I very much like the
way that it celebrates the plain
virtues of a vanished landscape of
work. Finally, Hanna/Olits’s “The
Meadows” for the ARCO Chemical
Company introduces a corporate
headquarters into a site that
included the remains of a private
school campus in the English

“landscape park” tradition. There
is sympathy for that past in the
design, but there are elements of
unconventional departures as well.
I liked the way that the building
was made to wrap around a court
of large trees—too close and
overwhelming for the low building
to accommodate picturesque
distancing in space, so that the
canopy trees and lawn are liberated,
in a sense, to work as metaphors.

Two projects in the exhibition seem
particularly strong examples of
architecture/landscape integration:
Antoine Predock’s Rio Grande
Nature Center and Fay Jones and
Maurice Jenning’s Thornicrown
Chapel. It is impossible to judge
whether these buildings succeed
in all the ways that architecture
must succeed—we do not know a
thing, for example, about how the
interior plan of Predock’s building
meets programmatic needs, if it is
aesthetically satisfying, etc. But it
does seem clear that the design of
these two buildings drew from the
very first, as Eckbo urged, upon
the nature of the site—recognizing
the essential principle that each
individual site is unique—and
then sought somehow to express
that engagement with the total
landscape through the language of
architectural form.