

## LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE A PROFESSION WITH NO LIVING AUTHORITIES

"It is the responsibility of all landscape architects to provide constructive, professional criticism which is imperative to ensure the continuing quality of landscape architecture practice and sound environmental planning for the public's benefit"

Draft - Ontario Association of Landscape  
Architects Code of Professional Conduct  
Ethics 2.11

Landscape architects forfeited the right to plant a straight row of trees when they embraced the modernist manifesto in 1946. Form cannot be said to follow function, they surmised, if the death of a single tree ruins a design intent. The modernist movement was more than just a philosophy on functional design. It was part of a new political wave, imposing its authority on western civilization. In the post-war years the major architecture schools of the United States were inundated by a vanguard of intelligentsia, fleeing the tyrannies and strife of Europe. Their need to create new ideas was accepted in such totality, that almost all symbolism from the past was shunned. The most taboo association would be anything representative of oppressive oligarches, such as the pre-revolutionary gardens of Versailles. The pre-modernists, who were studied in the traditional styles of Beaux-Arts and Italian, French and English "FORM-ALISM" were labeled as elitists. Their authority to be designated as designers was stripped. Their body of works was considered to be class conscious, unacceptably non-democratic and unforgivably old-fashioned. In his convocation address to the first graduates of modernism at Harvard, Walter Gropius implored them to refuse their travel scholarships to Europe for fear that their recently imprinted modernist precepts would fade away, indeed, be usurped by centuries of post-medieval urban design in Florence, Vienna, Venice et al.

Open covenants, openly conceived radiant city high-rise campuses; the rejection of all that had occurred before: these were tenets of the modernist. Exactly what the manifesto precepts might mean to the landscape architect was never clear. Go out and develop prototypes. Like describing the emperor's new clothes, the modernist disciples spread the new word across North America. And behold the KIDNEY-SHAPED swimming pool was born.

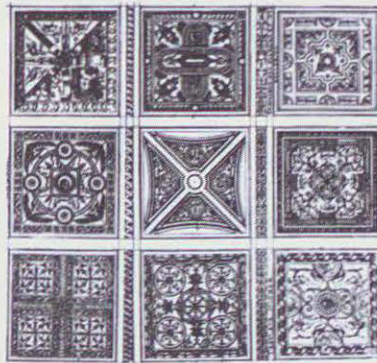
While modernist architects forged the International Style, the glass box with curtain walls and reinforced concrete floors, landscape architects published the California Style of french curve drafted free form pools, non-mathematical curvi-

linear patios and paths. Everything was novel, simple and eventually boring. Without true geometric arcs, builders had only approximated layouts from the drawings. At the end of the fifties, the major design offices stopped producing in this style and the period ended; though the drafting technicians kept their french curve templates. In retrospect, one may draw a similarity between this American new-romanticism and the English anti-formalism centuries before, when Capability Brown literally uprooted numerous axial, formal, French style gardens in favour of arcadian, pastoral views.

By 1964 two Canadian universities introduce degree programmes, Guelph and Toronto. Modernism is progressing a pace on the architecture side, as Brutalism precedes stripped down Rational Styles. The landscape schools, nascent and ready, are in search of a new authority. The student body recognizes that the site of design imagery of California was a dead end, but politely listens to visiting lecturers. No one speaks of the genius and subtleties of Andre Le Nostre's grading plans at Versailles. In fact, the entire European continent is all but dismissed except in compulsory history courses - concluding in brief essays or multiple choice tests. The romantic works of Repton and Brown are given some reverence; after all, their landscapes resemble golf courses. The first inkling of another direction occurs in a flirtation with eastern philosophies and the perceived natural character of Japanese gardens; at least they were non-European.

In 1964, on the west parking garage roof of the new Toronto City Hall, the first BERMS arrive. The chairman of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Hideo Sasaki, lays out a Japanese moss garden, executed in Kentucky blue grass and shade trees planted on bumps. From the point of view of economies of roof slab construction, the piece is instructively inventive. Berm up the heavy soil around the tree roots to position point loads directly above the garage columns. Hollow out shallower soil depths for concave grass space on the unsupported slab between the grid lines. Sasaki deliberately chooses





to deny the order of the column grid. A hemi-natural irregularity is produced by omitting several of the possible tree locations and ordering the positioning of the proposed trees slightly off the centre of the column tops. Was the Japanese Imagery the new authority or was it form follows means and merely something as mundane as the economies of modestly reinforced roof slabs?

In a mood of self-righteousness, the schools turned away from Japanese garden philosophy critically applying the label "Sycophantically Natural". They became aware that these gardens were not easily self-sustainable. Furthermore, the system was counter to western civilization which was progressively inventing labour saving, mechanical technologies and the Japanese Gardens required an army of servile minions to sweep the moss daily. For future reference, however, the landscape industry salvaged the berm and presented it to the first wave of youthful graduates.

Landscape architecture arrives at a major crossroad in the late sixties. The breadth of international modernism continues to exclude all references from the past - a highly arbitrary position. The two recent modes of design have withered and the landscape schools choose to forsake design altogether. The new romanticism reaches an extreme and DESIGN with NATURE becomes the rallying cry. Essentially the goal of this land development movement is to protect natural systems from possible disruption/destruction caused by construction and programmes of use, (eg. traffic exhaust, garbage disposal, drawing of fresh water). As a way of thinking, it has validity. It requires the practitioner, (or student) to be analytical and methodical in decision making. It has a weakness of being deterministic and sets up a series of either/or conditions. Furthermore, although it raises an ecological conscience, in the way it is taught, it is more like an unsophisticated adaptation of nineteenth century natural science techniques. In a logistical procedure that would make the Pentagon proud, of balancing the demands (of the market) with the supply (of nature), developments are planned with overlay maps to come pass with minimal environmental

impact. This kind of study is valuable, particularly in rural landscapes, but it is NON-DESIGN and almost meaningless in established urban areas. It is simply a new form of computer mapping romanticism. It is sequential in thought and the landscape architect seldom has to become defensive in a public presentation: these are all motherhood issues - do not build in flood plains, do not fill up a bog, do not divert storm water from returning to ground aquifers, etc. Basically, it identifies environment problems and obliges the analyst not to add to the problem.

Politically it is gaining power, starting with the fringe Sierra Club, through Greenpeace, Pollution Probe, to the Green Party and various new ministries of environment with associated legislative powers. There is a global anticipation foisted on the students. In 1987 Toronto students were expected to prepare plans to solve air pollution by reforestation along the Gardiner Expressway. Why stop at air pollution? Why not solve unemployment, inflation and child abuse? Pretending that this philosophical planning approach is a complete design programme has become one of the most ill-conceived authorities that the profession has ever deigned to study. It is helpful to be analytic and responsive to natural systems; but it is a stage in a planning process, and does not necessarily relate to the implementation design.

Unfortunately, graduates of this period took the design part to have meaning and after intense analysis of such simple site problems as laying out a shopping centre, they proceeded to mimic nature. No tree was predetermined in its planted location. Indeed, sometimes coins were tossed on a planting plan to give inspiration as to where Mother Nature would have dropped her trees. The results were invisible design (sic). If a tree died after the contractor's one year warranty had expired, no one cared to replace it, because its location was meaningless; a single pawn in the fight against air pollution.

The result is that the profession has a juvenile appearance. Instead of schools becoming technically knowledgeable,



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studying light engineering (walls, dams) and doing research and development in rootzone growth under pavement so a row of trees could live and mature over a century, the pseudo-scientific overlay matrixing of digitally collected natural data has created a phalanx of young professionals with little knowledge of design and no technical skills to execute their ideas.

*In comes the landscape contractor.* He is the final authority. During design development many ideas and concepts are generated and shed. Only the final idea is important, because it is what goes into the ground. One hopes it is the best idea. The authoritative contractor is the final decision maker. He tells the young graduate how, (and sometimes where), he will plant a tree. The contractor does not haul away excavated burrow. As an artisan, he persuades the young graduate that berms look natural, organic, almost sculptural, and most certainly make good acoustic/visual screens. Where is Le Nostre, when you need his inspiration? And for retaining walls, gravity stacked railway ties are easy to build for the contractor and no more complicated to design than popsicle stick craft lamp shades for the novice landscape architect. The new authority becomes the landscape contractor. But these systems have no substance. As Paul Reuber, architect, stated at the March 1988 Association of Landscape Architects convention, "If the antiquities of Rome had used berms and timber ties there would be nothing left to see today". The profession is open to ridicule.

Who are the giants, the inspiring practitioners, the authorities from whom to take notes and to aspire to their greatness? Start by re-establishing a comfort with Euclidean geometry. Study thoughtfully the garden plans of Vaux-le-Vicomte, Chantilly and Versailles. Recognize the avenues of Paris by Hausmann for the never retreating *zeitgeist* inspiration that the man must have had a full hundred years ago. Think about the state of downtown City of North York on Yonge Street, when you look at Hausmann's Champs Elysee. Do not overlook the etchings of Schinkel or the contemporary Riccardo Bofill. Their work, although different in style, integrates land-

scape and architecture like no one, who is practicing in North America. For reforestation, with form-alism, review Bofill's published proposal to plant the river beds of Valencia. Of course, none of these men are landscape architects. So be it. As a gesture to the profession may I suggest an intimate review of Frederick Law Olmstead's hierarchy of paths in Central Park, N.Y.C. and Martha Schwartz's environmental art gardens as exemplar authorities on design.

Time is the true authority. If a landscape architect uses a professional seal and authorizes the planting of trees that will not live for a century, will not mature to look like a Claude Lorraine or Nicholas Poussin oil painting, then he/she has no reason to be part of the landscape industry. Leave the tree planting to the contractors, to the nursery folk and to Arbour Day children. Why bother having landscape architects if they do not know with authority that their hundred year clocks will not run down ■

Dans cet exposé, J. L. Floyd examine le développement de l'architecture paysagiste depuis la dernière guerre mondiale et des changements brusques à l'intérieur des institutions d'enseignement. Il s'intéresse particulièrement à la confusion régnant chez les jeunes architectes paysagistes qui tentent tant bien que mal d'extrapoler leurs connaissances en planification régionale aux projets d'échelle urbaine.