

“Landscape Symphonies”; Gardening as a source of landscape architectural practice, engaged with change

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Abstract:

The notion of designing with change constitutes a fundamental and foundational theoretical premise for much of what constitutes landscape architecture, notably through engagement with ecology, particularly since the work of Ian McHarg in the 1960's and his key text “Design with Nature”. However, while most if not all texts in landscape architecture would cite this engagement of change theoretically, few go any further than citation, and when they do their methods seem fixated on utilising empirical, quantitative scientific tools for doing so, rather than the tools of design, in an architectural sense, as implied by the name of the discipline, landscape architecture.

Anne Whiston Spirn's text from the 1980's, “The Granite Garden”, was an inspiring and now seminal text that extended McHarg's ecological thinking from the broad landscape to detailed urban situations. In the introduction to her recent book “The Language of Landscape”, Spirn notes the reaction of some landscape architects to the “Granite Garden”: “But where's the art?”. She notes her shock at this delineation, saying “If the book was about sustaining health, safety, and welfare, was it not, then, about aesthetics?”. In locating this call to “art” in the realm of aesthetics, Spirn discusses design in a manner that is common to much theoretical writing in the discipline of landscape architecture, that is, an aestheticisation of design as an outcome rather than an act or practice of thinking and doing, a way of “using the world”. This separation reflects an art/science dichotomy that simultaneously empowers and hinders the potential of landscape architecture to reconceptualise what design is to it as a discourse of change and invention.

In response to the question “But where is the art?”, this paper sees the challenge not to locate art simply as the source of invention, but rather methods of being “artful” utilising the inherent change and dynamism of “the world”, by engaging with the flexibility of systems and time in a design sense. In light of a larger project to investigate the manipulation of change in landscape architecture, this paper seeks to scrutinize Spirn's discussion of change as one reflecting the definitions of change in landscape architecture generally. It will particularly utilize a case study discussed by Spirn of Scandinavian landscape architect Sven Ingvar Andersson's own garden. and will extend Spirn's discussion of this case study and hypothesize a landscape architectural design practice that draws upon the traditions of vernacular gardening. It will end by proposing that gardening may offer landscape architecture a type of design method, and most importantly, practices, that engage actively rather than passively with change.

This paper will attempt to begin a dialogue that may play a part in a fundamental and exciting change in landscape architectural practice: designers using change as a medium, rather than simply operating in an environment dictated by change.

Ecology as a source of truth in landscape architecture

Since the 1970's, most curricula in landscape architecture have featured natural science information extensively, positioning ecology, notably, as the base knowledge upon which most decision making, design or otherwise should be based. This fundamental belief in science obviously reflects the increase of environmental interest in society generally at that time, but also indicates the resonance that such knowledge would inevitably also have with a discipline entitled *landscape* architecture. This serendipity of this potential synchronicity of ecology with landscape architecture was noted with delight by Ian McHarg in 1967:



"I believe that ecology provides the single indispensable basis for landscape architecture and regional planning... Where the landscape architect commands ecology he is only the bridge between the natural sciences and the planning and design professions, the proprietor of the most perceptive view of the natural world which science or art has provided"¹.

This quote clearly subordinates the position of the discipline to the ecological imperative that it is ideally suited to orchestrate. That said, the muscularity of the notion of "command" in the quote above from McHarg suggests a wilful use of ecological knowledge even while landscape architecture is subordinated to it, that is much closer to the propositional nature of design than it is the analytical ones of science. In fact, it is the location of landscape architecture in this space between the two disciplines, a no-mans-land of not being a scientist nor an architect, of not quite analysing nor absolutely proposing, that has been the lasting legacy for the discipline that has allowed it to slip in terms of professional and public perception, even while architecture has subsumed both sustainability and increasingly landscape itself, both things that should rather give it increasing relevance.

In contrast to this earlier usage of "command" in relation to ecology, Anne Whiston-Spirn notes the naturalistic aesthetic implied in McHarg's, that is not surprising considering the period in which he was writing (also the period in Australia during which native gardens began to be advocated, while all other plants became exotic) :

"When McHarg calls ecology "not only an explanation but a command" he conflates ecology as a science (a way of describing the world), ecology as a cause (a mandate for moral action), and ecology as an aesthetic (a norm for beauty)"²

While McHarg is absolutely correct when he locates this nexus between design and science as the ideal location for landscape architecture, and ecology as a source for the discipline, his interest in ecology is literal and aesthetically driven by a romantic nature that is quite different from the non-judgemental container of ecology, (that is, an interdependent system of action and reaction between things, that could as easily be the stock-market as it could nature itself).

It is the contention of this paper that landscape architecture has lost its ability to "command" the systems that ecology opens to the discipline: the supremacy of the natural in the discipline is an ideological imperative related to the historical periods of its development, not its *raison d'etre*. That said, this paper will not discuss the natural in landscape architecture in canonical terms, but rather focus on the notion of "commanding ecologically", that is, actively engaging things *via*, and most

importantly *through*, the relationships between them. Consequently, this paper proposes that landscape architecture now needs to be wilful and seize ecology as a tool, and define a space for practicing design which is closer to systems engineering than it is to either science or art, however, design is still a formal exercise of invention, so even while one hypothesises different uses by landscape architecture of ecology, a means must be created for it to be considered formally.

The form of ecology is change

In her recent book "The Language of Landscape", Spiri examines spatial hierarchies in projects and places that are exemplary for her in terms of their form and meaningfully communicated content. This notion of landscapes communicating, sets a definition of landscapes as active rather than passive, particularly in terms of our intellectual and moral connections with them. While not discussing here this dialogue between people and places, Spiri's approach is clearly ecological in its interest in cause and effect, and relationships generally, and in its discussion of the interplay between them describes a formal language for ecology that might most commonly be understood as *change*.

Change is an important notion here because it engages both the temporality of ecology, that is that cause and effect happens in a particular order in time, as well as suggesting a definable, that is, a formal outcome of such a transformation. In other words, the transformation of something is revealed by its formal state *now* compared to its formal state *before*. This sense of change is clearly articulated in the OED, "An instance of making or becoming different", that notes the temporality (the instance) and implies the form (the difference) of change. Importantly for this definition of form in relation to ecology is the subsequent definition, which recognises that one thing might change through the effect of another: "the substitution of one set of thing or set of conditions for another". In formal terms this suggests a strange space of cause and effect, where form arises through implication and actions at a remove, through things influencing other things.

While not actually defining a formal language of change, Spiri defines a space in which it might occur, *context*, "a place where processes happen, a setting of dynamic relationships *not* a collection of static states", then positioning design in this realm as an act where:

"To speak in context is to distinguish deep and lasting contexts from those that are superficial and fleeting; its is to respond to the rhythms and histories of each and to project those contexts into the future. To guide such contextual expression is the function of the grammar of landscape"³

In a further articulation of the space of context described above, Spiri begins to suggest form through the definition of the edges of context, here described as territory, that become a catchment of change, a valley in which it is contained:

"Territory is established by the limits of the processes which create it... A path is maintained by movement. Once a process ceases, space becomes a shell of past practices"⁴


This definition of territory clearly reveals a crisis for this kind of ecological thinking in terms of form, since as we know from thermo-dynamics that nothing ceases to exist but rather just changes energy state. This kind of anthropomorphism again demonstrates the limited understanding that landscape architecture has of ecology. In the above example what has actually happened is that

only certain practices are deemed worthy of recognition by the discipline, or perhaps the discipline, from its architectural base, only regards certain things, or in change-language, certain types of evidence as having form.

This limited view of ecology is revealed as pragmatic, when Spirn further notes: "Material, form and space are sensed and shaped by processes... neglecting pertinent processes can lead not only to failure of function and expression, but even to destruction and death"⁵. In these terms, change is something that *must* be considered then dealt with for a design project to *perform*, and indeed to neglect it is to : "concentrate on formal qualities of space and neglect performance is to mistake the shell of practices which shape and activate it"⁶. Ecology here is revealed as a consideration in a matrix of site information rather than a commanding strategy.

There are both historic practices and recent practitioners that engage with change in such a way that they are "designing at a remove", that is designing things that will then affect the world in a formal way, even if they are not doing it themselves. In this catchment of form and processes, Spirn notes, "Shaping the context in which landscape is shaped is an act of design"⁷.

Practices of Landscape Architecture

To talk of "seizing" ecology is to suggest a different engagement with it from the way it has been conventionally utilised in landscape architecture, which is as a *consideration* in an adapted architectural design process (adapted to include geographic mapping systems via computation-like overlay analysis). While landscape architecture practice therefore involves ecology, the location of the discipline in McHarg's science-design nexus rather suggests a type of practice that *is* ecological. Such a practice would be fundamentally different from architectural practice, in so far as architecture clearly works toward a finite and final state, after which a project is complete, subsequent works to the project comprising either those required to maintain this state (such as ecting defects) or renovations and the like, which again work to a finite sense of intention. Where processes that are ecological do occur in this model of architectural practice, they do so in a manner that is distinctly removed from the constructed reality of the project, even if they influence it: the built project itself is dealt with as a virtual entity while the designers are working on it, perhaps even while it is built. The closeness of the project to its built nature during the process of architectural design will mostly be a question of representation rather than actuality, and one that reflects the critical (both in contractual and class terms) differentiation between architect and builder.

While landscape architecture operates within a similar professional milieu and practices in a similar manner to architecture, it has at its root an evolution that is distinctly different to that of architecture, which is that it has developed from the practice of gardening, that range of which is noted by Spirn, in a slightly different take to the nexus described by McHarg:

"Tensions and contradictions in landscape architecture also stem from the intellectual biases and unresolved conflicts between the disciplines it draws from: agriculture (gardening, horticulture, forestry), engineering, architecture and fine arts, science (ecology)"⁸

Examining this cocktail, apart from the art–science divisions it implies, is a difference in professional operation that comes with the agricultural root of the garden, as a variation from a productive trade the cultivation of the earth, an act that wilfully engages the inherent trajectories of natural systems for a productive human outcome. It does this in a manner very different from the ideological imperatives that landscape architecture has anthropomorphically projected onto ecology, even if the wilful use of the natural in agriculture has come with its own environmental consequence. Clearly each of these different roots has a different way of *doing*, its own type of practice, even if the architectural notion of practice has become the norm in how the profession does what it does. In examining the definition of “practice” in the OED, the first definition of practice is as “the habitual doing or carrying out of something; action as opposed to profession”, while second contradictorily defines it as “The carrying out or exercise of a profession”. These definitions seem to describe the distance from the subject that representation seeks to bridge, and it is through an examination of practices as part of a design palette in landscape architecture that this paper attempts to propose an alternative way of working for the discipline.

If ecology is a type of activity, and the architectural models utilised by landscape architecture seem unable to engage with it, perhaps it is because the discipline is practising in such a way that it is unable to be active within them, a point which is clear when one thinks of the discrepancy between the representation of a tree in a plan and contrast it with its change over time and its varying spatial or microclimatic effects. Yet, a creative involvement with such a tree is precisely what the gardener is doing when she or he prunes it to a form in response to a trend in its recent growth. In this instance, the gardener seems to be undertaking practices that are more engaged with change than a landscape architect in an office, removed from the flexible processes of the garden ever could.

Perhaps if one wishes to understand the manner in which one might seize ecology to work ecologically rather than just consider it one might ask if landscape architecture could regain its wilfulness by looking to its poor cousin, gardening?

A case study in engaging with change

Spirn ends *Language of Landscape* by discussing the work of Danish landscape architect Sven-Ingvar Andersson, that reveals an existing “terrain” that may provide a base from which change can be approached from within the cannon of landscape architecture by engaging its gardening history and most importantly practices.

Marc Trieb, discussing Scandinavian landscape architectural tradition, notes: “The Swedish approach seems to be tinted by an Eastern idea of recasting an existing condition, for example, the way that the Japanese martial art of judo uses the opponents body against him”⁹. In terms of Andersson’s garden work, Spirn notes that in his garden, Marnas, he uses the garden as a laboratory to test things: “For him, traditional gardening is a link through history to human existence and evolution”¹⁰. This tradition of the garden as a private place to test and monitor ideas over time is one which characterises much European work, including that of Dieter Kienast, as well as Australia’s Vladimir Sitta. As a vernacular design practice, gardening, for Spirn seems to represent a strong dialogue between peoples practices and places:



“Local landscape dialects emerge out of dialogue with enduring contexts of place: traditional vernacular landscapes are a consequence of collective learning, trial and error, finding what works and repeating it, refining through experience”¹¹

Anderson’s garden at Marnas comprises a series of bushes that are seemingly randomly placed on a lawn outside his back gate, that he has pruned into the shape of chickens, and represents the clearest moment in his work wherein temporality and form are engaged with in real time:

“Andersson foresaw a time when he would no longer have the strength to “hold clippers or climb up ladders” (regarding his topiary of hens, cut from hawthorn) “I have a definite idea of how my hen yard will end, but a lot which lies between *now* and *then* is an open plan...A lot can happen before the hen yard becomes a hawthorn grove”¹²

This practice dislocates the deferral of design to a perfect condition, as well as the engineering of processes to finite, predictable outcomes, but rather makes the form of the design something that reflects the sensibilities of the individual at the time, and their direct relationship to a form that will change, where their manipulation will reflect their views, as well as the evolution of their sensibilities and judgement. In this model, the garden becomes a sketchbook, something that accompanies, rather than the termination of a notional “project”.

As a material, “change” seems to be vaguely delimited by a potential of a “will”¹³ inherent in the medium, and perhaps engagement with change is characterised by an appreciation of the variables of flexibility within the material designed, as Andersson notes (from Spirn):

“the hawthorns permit enormous variation, from metre high closely clipped to the freely growing 20 foot tree. But not beyond those limits which lie in being a hawthorn, which means that every single cell, whether it sits in the roots or in the skin of the fruit has a predetermined number of chromosomes with a particular set of genes, which can vary a little bit and give each plant its unique individuality, yet still ensure similarities in form and mode of meeting external conditions”¹⁴

In a testimonial for Andersson, Spirn locates his enquiries:

“How can we find a balance you ask, between planning and flexibility, between stability on one hand and freedom, growth and individual development on the other? The garden at Marnas embodies your resolution of these questions: establish a structure and let the details evolve... The structure establishes the order: time and circumstance contribute complexity”¹⁵

Conclusion

This practice of gardening of Andersson’s is outside the traditional realm of landscape architecture, even if the discipline has conditioned the sensibilities that he has exercised there. While the landscape architect might be able to draw any moment in the growth of the Hawthorn that Andersson describes, it is precisely the reactions of the gardener that make it ecological, and the form specific, as the gardener observes the plant and then the plant reacts to the gardener in turn, with its new growth habit. In considering change, perhaps landscape architecture practice is not suited to this inquiry: rather, the humble and amateur pursuit of the gardener is more able to do so.

This separation between the amateur and the professional reflects a subjective / objective dialectic, that change seems to occupy. In the real time pursuit of the gardener, with personal decision, making form and maintenance happening in the tempo of an individual's life, the medium of gardens is able to wax and wane in a way that the pre-conceptions of the plan will never allow.

¹ Ian L Mc Harg, 'An Ecological Method (1967)', from Simon Swaffield (Ed.) *Theory in landscape architecture: a reader* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

² Anne Whiston Spirn, 'Ian McHarg, Landscape Architecture and Environmentalism: Ideas and Methods in Context', p.112

³ Anne Whiston Spirn, *The language of landscape* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 124

⁴ Spirn, *Language of Landscape*, p. 119

⁵ Spirn, *Language of Landscape*, p. 96

⁶ Spirn, *Language of Landscape*, p. 124

⁷ Spirn, *Language of Landscape*, p. 208

⁸ Spirn, *Language of Landscape*, pp. 244-245

⁹ Marc Treib, 'Sven-Ingvar Andersson, who should have come from Hven', from Steen Hoyer (Ed.) *Tilegnet : Sven-Ingvar Andersson* (Denmark: Arkitektens Forlag, 1994, p.62

¹⁰ Spirn, *Language of Landscape*, p. 191

¹¹ Spirn, *Language of Landscape*, p. 181

¹² Spirn, *Language of Landscape*, p. 192

¹³ I use "will" here in the Nietzschean sense, much as McHarg suggest about the "command of ecology" earlier in the paper, to denote an intentionality in form, or a coming into "being-ness" in a Heideggerian sense.

¹⁴ Spirn, *Language of Landscape*, p. 177

¹⁵ Anne Whiston Spirn, 'Texts, Landscapes and Life', from Steen Hoyer (Ed.) *Tilegnet : Sven-Ingvar Andersson* (Denmark: Arkitektens Forlag, 1994, p.115