



BLUES AND GREENS

PROMINENT LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT WALTER HOOD LIKES TO USE THE MUSIC OF HIS AFRICAN-AMERICAN HERITAGE – JAZZ AND BLUES – TO EXPLAIN HIS DESIRE FOR ARCHITECTURE IN DIALOGUE WITH ITS ENVIRONMENT. JULIAN RAXWORTHY SPOKE TO HIM ON HIS RECENT VISIT TO AUSTRALIA.

WALTER HOOD IS AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN landscape architect. He was educated at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, a historically black college, and undertook a masters degree in architecture, urban design and landscape architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, where his teachers included Garrett Eckbo and Randy Hester. Hood is Chair of Landscape Architecture at the university. He maintains a commercial practice, Hood Design, out of Oakland, California, and is currently collaborating on projects with Herzog & de Meuron. He was recently in Australia to speak at the Mesh landscape architecture conference at RMIT.

I have read with interest your discussions of jazz and your development of this as a design methodology. Could you briefly discuss this approach and distinguish it from its (presumable) antecedents in the methods of Lawrence Halprin and Christopher Alexander?

When I began to look at jazz and blues music as an inspiration for my work I quickly moved away from the graphic or literal interpretation of notational systems and iconography. Alexander's patterns as language and Halprin's notations from nature seemed not to capture what I believed to be the important contributions of African Americans in music. From my research, what interested me was the process of improvisation and how black artists were able to meld their experience into the art through an ever-changing dialogue. The notion of extemporaneous change and invention within a prescribed framework appealed to me; utilising familiar forms and objects in space and reinterpreting them based on environmental, physical and social context interests me deeply. Being able to make landscapes that have soul... the idiosyncratic that does not seem out of place... that to me is jazz and blues in landscape. The drawings and the rhetoric cannot substitute for the real landscape experiences and the process of making them, but in my position one has to attempt to articulate the work. It's like listening to a musician describe how they play... it's hard to imagine the music.

There is no doubt the formal resolution of projects that have a social interest is a major issue for design, and for architecture and landscape in particular. In Melbourne architecture, this tends to be through cultural referents and design generation methods that finally render the social issue in an abstract and rhetorical manner. Your diurnal method, of noting the temporal and programmatic changes in spaces, seems to still treat


these as a diagram with extruded forms and material substitutions. Is this a fair criticism, and can you comment on other ways you have engaged social interactions?

Architectural/landscape projects are formal solutions in one way or another, meaning that to build implies a method or means. Whether abstract, formal or fuzzy (natural), these are rational means for bringing ideas forward in the third dimension. The diurnal approach I employ is a form of analysis that records and documents human patterns and practices within a given context. In order to connect these actions/events to a specific space and locale, there has to be a vessel that accommodates the 'familiar' derived from these observations. What you characterise as extruded forms and materials I see as non-objective frameworks that allow the 'familiar' to be possessed. For example, a circle of poplar trees with a wooden chair placed in the middle: the space allows for the chair to be possessed without implying any preconception of what they mean together. The circle of trees is silent.

I was impressed by your range of street projects and their design angles. Streetscape has indeed become a major type of commission for landscape architects, yet it seems to fall outside traditional notions of design – or rather, becomes simple gentrification. Can you comment on the significance of the street to landscape architecture and discuss your design approach to them?

Returning earlier to my comment on environmental equity and the question of an African-American expression in landscape architecture, it's funny that somehow the street figures prominently in the work. In black communities the streets are the most important landscape; everything happens in the street – like in many cultures around the world. Unfortunately, in America the street is seen as infrastructure and not landscape. We are attempting to recover the street as landscape, mixing the patterns of the everyday together with the road bed. We approach them in the same way we work on other projects, but the traffic engineer is a prominent addition to the team.

Do you have a particular landscape architectural project you have found inspirational, and how has that inspiration affected your practice?

There is a project that is modest by all means and has had a profound impact on my work. It is a work by artist George Trakas, located at the Villa Celle in central Italy. The project is entitled "The Path Of Two Lovers". It is a space that runs along a creek. There are two paths: one made of steel and the other of wood. Over the terrain, both paths extend up and down and side to side. Steps, ramps, twists etc, in each engage the ground. The material reacts through its changing details, and over time one will leave the other behind. It's just so simple. To me this is landscape architecture. 

A more in-depth interview with Walter Hood will be published, together with interviews with the other keynote speakers at the conference, in the RMIT landscape architecture journal, Kerb 10. kerb@rmit.edu.au