

Specificity: the impossibility of not projecting

JULIAN RAXWORTHY

ULTIMATELY, NO MATTER HOW ONE MAY AVOID IT, and from whatever angle one approaches it, all landscape design is judged in terms of its 'appropriateness'. The inherent subjectivity of any judgement of appropriateness has become the enduring paradox of landscape design practice. Despite this paradox, however, most designers would agree, from an epistemological perspective at least, that the determination of appropriateness resides in how the design is seen to respond to the specificity of the brief (or program) and the site (the brief 'given' and the site 'received'). The challenge of 'appropriateness' seems to be the location of the 'specific' in the site. The appreciation of the 'specific' is the same as an understanding of that which is 'significant' in a site.

THIS APPRECIATION OF THE 'SPECIFIC' within the discourse of landscape architecture is based upon the collection and assessment of 'relevant' information about the 'nature' of the site (or subject) through 'analytical' methodologies, the most dominant of which is the generic 'Site Analysis'.²

Describing 'Site Planning', of which 'Site Analysis' is a component, Laurie notes that: 'The program and the site may be thought of as two sets of forces: one, the site, which strives to express itself, its uniqueness; the other the uses in the program.'³ This description assumes the ability to 'read' the site, and the ability to appreciate such 'uniqueness'. The model Laurie utilises locates uniqueness in what can be seen as three epistemological groupings: 'Natural' (geology, soil, topography, vegetation, wildlife, climate), 'Historical' (existing factors) and 'Human' (social factors, visual quality).⁴

In deconstructive terms, if one were to work backwards from all the existing 'stuff' on the site to that which the analytical system regards as fact, but which is simply privileged information, one begins to discern the prejudices of the discourse—the ethical and ideological systems that form its basis.⁵ These systems are characterised by an interest in those things measurable in allegedly 'objective' terms. In terms of landscape architecture's role within the cultural production of society at that time (the 1970s), this information could be seen as an appropriation of 'ecology', which is fundamentally empiricism with an even better concealed value judgement. Once conditioned by the 'measurable' nature of ecology, those values that are unmeasurable by this criteria, 'Human' and 'Historical', are dealt with by being sidelined into other measurable approximates: the recording of age and mapping of location ('Existing Factors'); patterns of use ('Social Factors'); and optics ('Visual Quality'). This desire to convert all values into measurable approximates suggests that the information which is ignored plays an 'uncanny' role in the 'Site Planning' process; it is at once 'irrelevant', yet it is also required to determine that which is relevant simply through its status of 'otherness'.⁶

*Julian Raxworthy is a part-time Lecturer in Landscape Architecture at RMIT, and a principal of 'Other Consultants' 213 Errol Street, North Melbourne, Victoria, 3053, Australia.
Email: jraxwo@rmit.edu.au*

KEY WORDS

*Landscape architecture and site planning
Strategies toward site specificity
Site specificity and representation
Site specificity and analysis
Site specificity and cultural production
Site specificity and the vernacular
Site specificity and historical moment*

REFLECTIONS

The specific is a product of culture

Chronologically speaking, such a landscape's 'uniqueness' has been spoken of as 'worthy of Claude's [Lorrain] pencil'⁷ during the 'Picturesque', while modern landscape architectural discourses describe the medium of landscape as 'subject to change and growth over millions of years, and [which] will doubtless continue to exist'.⁸ These distinct differences make it impossible to speak of a universal understanding of what constitutes significance in a landscape, as each existed within a particular larger contemporary cultural frame. Rather, these differences highlight the frailty of an empirical analysis, largely regarded as unimpeachable. Both of these differences utilise their descriptions to describe a media. That is to say, they both regard the landscape as something that exists, that is 'productive' for their discourse. Their aim is one of modification and alteration, of an 'Existing',⁹ and utilising that 'Existing'. Understanding of the 'Existing' in landscape architecture flutters between the subjectification and objectification of nature, the utilisation of which is completely dependent on expediency, determined by contemporary cultural judgements, from outside the discourse.

Returning to Laurie, the final design outcome of the 'Site Planning' process is described as 'a compromise between the adaptation of the site to fit the program and the adaptation of the program on account of the site'.¹⁰ This description softens the institutional violence that is at the core of site planning; the site is compromised.¹¹ While the program may change, it did not physically exist before the site. The site is its enunciator. The integrity of the site is destroyed by the inscription of the program. The contradiction of this violence is the core of this discursive typology. Colloquially regarding itself as the custodian of the land for the good of the people, landscape architecture assumes its role within the cultural production of systems of value, at once conditioning by and for these systems. Correspondingly, each discourse modifies its premises and modes of practice to that of the cultural context in which it is located. This puts landscape architecture in the rather awkward position of, through its custodian role, privileging ecological information as inviolate fact,¹² while at the same time, in being 'for the people', it is consciously and uncompromisingly partaking in the environmental degradation that is inherent within the production and consumption of capitalism¹³ through its status as a 'service' industry. The interpretation of nature is always a political act, and landscape architecture is precisely the creation of Western metaphysics to conceal this fact.

Habermas regards the status of the 'discourse' in the project of modernity as a breakdown in 'communicative rationality', where an entire world view is seen through the filter of a single discourse, or where the discourse attempts to shoulder an entire world view.¹⁴ This gives a sense of inevitability to the responsibility that landscape architecture invests in itself. Within a capitalist system of production and meaning, and under this fracturing discussed by Habermas, this responsibility represents the visibility of the discomfort that landscape architecture has with the program that forms its base: destruction.¹⁵ Again, in deconstructive terms, the great weight that is placed by landscape architecture on the allegedly 'objective' discourse of ecology emphasises the fact that the very basis of the profession is antithetical to its own articulated philosophies.¹⁶

The specific and representation

Each of Laurie's criteria for assessment of significance are represented on similarly scaled plans that note the location of occurrences as well as qualitative values, called the 'Site Analysis'. These plans are then overlaid on top of each other to determine relationships that exist between one criteria and another, and the programs of the brief are accommodated in relation to these 'site characteristics'. These analysable aspects must, for the purposes of its utility in 'Site Planning', occur in a spatial location and be a certain size to be significant (according to the most reproducible scale of the diagram). This is apart from any criteria that judges its qualitative aspects that allow it to be located in the categories described above. In discursive terms this is critical because its ability to be located within the graphic of the discourse, as well as its ability to be captured in a cartographic sense, are vital prerequisites to its membership of the category of 'significance', and therefore its ability to be 'useful' information. Assuming that the above strategies were able to access the 'specific', the issues of scale and representation become critical. At what scales are the 'specific' available and relevant?

There is a significant difference here. While a 'specific' may be available at a certain scale, it may not be relevant, and vice versa. Such a methodology would subordinate the 'specific' to its means of representation.¹⁷ Despite this, however, the fact that such a determination of the scale at which something is relevant is a projection from the brief to the site and is, therefore, another means of generalising away from the 'specific' or the importation of the 'specific' to the site.

Since representation is a validation mechanism, the logic could be seen to be 'if it can be represented, it must be there'. Representation requires some familiarity of knowledge, such that: it can be recognised; it can be represented; and others will be able to view the representation and appreciate the original.¹⁸ This would appear to be an inherent contradiction since the 'specific' is by nature unique, whereas the representation requires previous recognition.

If one takes the position of landscape architecture as the compromiser of site, this would show a very different role of the description of the site through representation. The description of the site would be a means of distancing from the imminent destruction, of anaesthetising the practitioner from feeling angst at their task: the site's uniqueness as an existing entity is 'compromised'.

The completed 'Site Plan', from Laurie's 'Site Planning' process, provides the basis on which design can begin. This 'Site Plan' comprises a completely abstracted interpretation of the site and represents the end point of making the site recognisable and useful in reference to its ability to be productive in design terms, discursively speaking. The 'Site Plan' presents itself as a standardised place with value judgements already made. This removes the site from its physicality and places it within the world view of the discourse.

Despite the apparent pitfalls of 'Site Planning', however, the imperative of 'appropriateness', and therefore 'specificity' is no less urgent. What other methods are there, then, for accessing such information or determining what 'specificity' is, or more specifically, what is 'specific'?

The specific and essences: historical moment

Another strategy of accessing the 'specific' is the location of the essential or the 'essence'. This is most commonly undertaken by mainstream landscape architectural practices through either the adoption of the 'Period/Era' motif or analysis of a site's cultural, or historical, character.

The period motif operates in the same way as the 'Site Analysis'. The documented history of a site is examined as if the history was itself a singular site, and essentially its heyday, or its most positive and nostalgically interesting moment, is located. From a particular representation, parallels are found in the rendering of program, and these are then appropriated for the contemporary program. These motifs tend to be utilised for either the design of objects such as lights, seats, bins etc, or for treatments such as pavements, kerbs and the like.

The greatest opportunity within this type of design generation lies in the didactic quality that such excursions must have. However, this aspect is not only ignored but actually regarded as repulsive, so unself-conscious is the trust in the sustained reference of the original. Any appropriations must have this quality because usage is interpretive by nature, acting as a framing mechanism. The opportunities of this design generation are clearly evidenced in the *Placa del Constitution de Girona* project, by architects Torres and La Pena, in Catalonia, Spain, where the designers have consciously mutated, developed and inflected these motifs to give them contemporary value beyond simply empty reference, thereby enriching the motifs.

The second mechanism of accessing the essence of a place as design material is through the construction of a picture of the cultural character of a site. The City of Melbourne publication, *Grids & Greenery: The Character of Inner Melbourne*²⁰ identifies types that can be seen as characteristic of the city, such as the street, the boulevard, the park etc. The fundamental objective of this exercise was the establishment of guidelines for appropriate treatment of public space, based on substantial research that equates length of existence with design, social and functional quality. From this research a series of guidelines were produced that became the material of design, most notably the *Technical Notes*,²¹ which note characteristic historical details. After these research outcomes a methodology of reinforcing or reintroducing existing, presumably typologically well established entities rather than speculating and proposing new types of public space has been utilised to characterise spaces, based on the assumption that the types for reintroduction have demonstrated formal, historical, social and functional truths within them.

By selecting a particular element from a specific historical period, and then identifying it as significant by utilising it as motif or treatment, what actually becomes significant is those times that are left unreferenced, and contextualise the motif and locate it within the historical frame. Left ambiguous through unself-conscious interpretation, these motifs emphasise the simplification of history that occurs through the breakdown in the 'communicative rationality' mentioned above. This is, of course, not to mention that it is impossible to have something that is specific to a single site that also occurred simultaneously everywhere. These ambiguities, then, make it another generalising projection, rather than a genuine attempt at locating the specific.²²

The specific and essences: the vernacular

Relatively recent discussions in landscape architecture attempt to locate 'the essence' in the 'Vernacular', particularly in an effort to re-engage 'the middle landscape' of suburbia. The 'Vernacular' refers to a vocabulary of forms and arrangements of the 'everyday' that occur spontaneously in undesigned environments.²³ This approach would see the vernacular and the banal as genuine, unpretentious cultural production, a kind of unconscious expression of belonging to a specific location. One could particularly note the work of Martha Schwarz and projects in community art that operate from this premise. This view fails to note that designed and undesigned cultural expression both fit within the same structure of capitalist production and therefore cannot be separated so easily. Assuming that there is such a thing as the essence in the 'Vernacular', however, this is another instance where the inherent modes of operation of the discourse would interfere.

The discourse of landscape architecture would have to have, even to be able to note the existence of the vernacular, an institutionalised means of ascertaining membership to the category, such that it was able to note something 'specific', in a manner similar to that described for representation. However, to have such a mechanism would suggest that the vernacular was able to be formulated, and such an understanding would undermine its ability to be something 'specific', that is something in which 'significance' resides.

Apart from this mechanism for ascertaining membership, the utilisation of the vernacular must be, in itself, a contradiction. It is impossible to be utilised precisely because it accretes unself-consciously. To attempt to utilise it is a self-conscious act and as soon as one becomes aware of it it is rendered unavailable, or at least empty of the original expression that made it worth appropriating in the first place. When the vernacular is appropriated, the material tends to be twee, not to mention odd, as this peripheral entity comes to the foreground. Through its own belonging, the vernacular is unavailable to the outside, and through its pretentious application it is invalidated. Also, assuming the discourse had access to the vernacular and was actively involved in the perpetuation of its self-conscious moral and ethical codes, patriarchy and ethnocentric racism are inherent in some vernacular systems. This is because the vernacular is a part of the cultural production of a culture in which those values are inherent. Consequently, any 'specific' site would also be engendered with the same values through the culture's spatial production,²⁴ making it contradictory to the articulated philosophical positions of the discourse.

The specific: non-existent

All of the factors mentioned previously seem to indicate that it is impossible to locate unique site-specific entities. The ramifications of this are great when one considers the role of the specific in the legitimation of design decisions, and even greater when one considers that landscape architects design complete environments which have a definite role in passing on societal conditioning.²⁵ Of even greater significance is the status of the fact, from which it could appear to be a downward slide into Sophistic solipsism. Assuming one would wish to avoid this, where to from here?