Redefining Place: The Integration of Landscape Theory into Architectural Design

I. The Rise of Landscape Architecture (Brief History)

The institutionalized disciplines of architecture and landscape architecture have historically been subject to a consistent categorical separation. Within both fields, a difference in scale and focus garnered an inherent distinction and divide between their job specifications: “architects construct buildings and, with engineers and planners, they design cities; landscape architects build landscapes, in the form of earthwork, planting, and open-space design.”¹ As a result, an implicit power struggle began to form due to this perceived difference in dimension and a hyper-professionalized classification. According to James Corner, renowned landscape architect, competing power relations worsened between these two groups, as within the procedural nature of a design project, landscapers felt repressed by architects and planners, or appropriated only to the extent of framing and enhancing the urban form.² Landscape architects felt like they were only being employed by the architects of a project to provide a bourgeois aesthetic, a naturalized veil. This professional tension became so established and engrained within the design culture, that both groups started to compete between one another. For instance, the landscape community felt especially indignant when the famous Parc de la Villette design competition in 1982 in Paris, France, was won by an architect. And vice versa, “when a landscape architect won a competition that architects thought belonged in their domain, there can be heard some rather cynical grumbling in that court too.”³

Nevertheless, at the close of the twentieth century, landscape architecture entered a period of social and cultural renewal, becoming redefined and reimagined within the design community.⁴

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
As a result of the amalgamation of different relevant factors, such as the rapidly growing population, the rise of progressive architectural culture and environmentalism, and the popularization of postmodernist critiques of modernist architecture and planning, the design disciplines gradually began to break down the competitive barrier and comply with one another, collaborating equally to explore new methods, models or frameworks for the new, 21st century contemporary city; “Given the complexity of the rapidly urbanizing metropolis, to continue to oppose nature against culture, landscape against city is to risk complete failure of the architectural and planning arts to make any real or significant contribution to future urban formations.”5 Thus, towards the end of the twentieth century, landscape architecture’s conceptual scope becomes revalued for its ability to theorize different sites, urban fields, infrastructures and ecosystems within certain thematic frameworks of dynamic interaction, organization and ecological thinking, ultimately pointing to a looser, more emergent urbanism. Additionally, as urban planning shifted away from design culture and more towards social science, landscape was looked at to fill that void, offering alternatives to rigid, centralist planning mechanisms, and an interdisciplinary, shared form of practice with the different design fields. Landscape emerged as a new, refreshing way of looking at urban form at the heels of certain social, environmental and economic transformations, and the profession of landscape architecture was reborn as a ‘new art’, “charged with reconciling design of industrial city with ecological and social functions, thinking of sites at the intersection of large and complex systems.”6 Ultimately, through this rethinking of landscape architecture’s functions and applications, certain revitalized landscape ideologies can be applied and learned across disciplines and across scales to architecture itself, reshaping our design process and scope, and fostering a new definition of place itself.

II. Landscape, Landscape Urbanism and the Design Process

In order to continue exploring this shift in architectural thinking, the resulting birth of the landscape urbanism movement, and ultimately landscape architecture’s role within the design process, it is important to first define and distinguish both landscape and urbanism within this new context. Charles Waldheim traces the origins of landscape to the 16 century, where it was

6 Ibid.
considered a genre of painting of natural and earthly scenery. Overtime, in the 17th and 18th century, landscape took on a more promiscuous, broader and more diverse definition: a form of experiencing the world and the practices that modify the land. Within this context, I believe the more evolved and determinant definition of landscape and its function comes from architectural theorist Stan Allen, who states: “landscape has traditionally been defined as the art of organizing horizontal surfaces. By paying close attention to these surface conditions—not only configuration, but also materiality and performance—designers can activate space and produce urban effects without the weighty apparatus of traditional space making.” Thus, the cultural and social renewal of landscape architecture demonstrated that landscape’s inherent conditions can be applied to the built environment in order to redefine how we think about urban form. With that, the definition of urbanism becomes much more all encompassing and totalizing, simply as the study of conditions and characteristics of urbanization. Urbanism paints the city as an object of study, and landscape emerges as a medium through which to study the different dimensions of that urban work, as a means for urban or city design. Consequently, the origins of landscape urbanism discourse arise at the turn of the 21st century, combining both ideas in a new movement that promises to integrate dynamic landscape flows into the traditional infrastructural systems driving urban development. Landscape urbanism, in other words, poses the idea that “the complexity of the metabolism that drives the contemporary metropolis demands a conflation of professional and institutionalized distinctions into a new synthetic art, a spatio-material practice able to bridge scale and scope with critical insight and imaginative depth.” Furthermore, landscape urbanism proposes the potential of the landscape architect becoming the urbanist of our modern era, assuming responsibility for the shape, built form, ecology, infrastructure and most importantly the dynamic performance of a city, suggesting a more radical and creative form of practice that previously dictated by rigid professional categorizations.

The official introduction of landscape urbanism came by way of the Landscape Urbanism Symposium and Exhibition in 1997, originally conceived by landscape architect Charles Waldheim, and then further articulated through a plethora of journal publications. Waldheim

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10 Ibid.
identified four provisional themes within this newly introduced practice in the efforts of providing a schematic outline for the foundations of landscape urbanism: processes over time, the staging of surfaces, the operational or working method, and the imaginary.\footnote{Waldheim, Charles, and James Corner. “Terra Fluxes.” In The Landscape Urbanism Reader, 1–37. New York: Princeton, 2006.} The focus here will be on the two most important and multi-dimensional themes of the four that blend together and can be extrapolated across different design disciplines. Firstly is the theme of process over time, in which its guiding principle becomes the notion that the processes of urbanization (globalization, environmental protection, capital accumulation, etc.) are significantly more useful in shaping urban relationships as opposed to the spatial forms of urbanism. Walheim argues that new possibilities for future urbanisms are extracted from an understanding of process, or how things work in space and time, rather than form, and spatial form must seek to construct a dialectical understanding in terms of how it relates to the processes that flow through it and sustain it. Moreover, this allows for the development of a spacetime ecology that treats all agents of the urban field as continuous networks of inter-relationships, a kind of urbanism that becomes open-ended, fluid, and looks to anticipate change. “The modernist notion that physical structures yield new patterns of socialization has exhausted its run, failing by virtue of trying to contain the dynamic multiplicity of urban processes within a fixed, rigid, spatial frame that neither derived from nor redirected any of the processes moving through it.”\footnote{Ibid.} An early example of this is Louis Khan’s plan for vehicular circulation in Philadelphia in 1953. In his diagrams, he uses ecology and hydrology as a framework for expressing the different dynamic urban implementations as iconographic figures illuminated at nighttime in order to allow for both navigation and speed regulation: “Expressways are like rivers. These rivers frame the area to be served. Rivers have Harbors. Harbors are the municipal parking towers; from the Harbors branch a system of Canals that serve the interior; . . . from the Canals branch cul-de-sac Docks; the Docks serve as entrance halls to the buildings.”\footnote{Ibid.} Subsequently, this leads into the other theme of landscape urbanism: the operational or working method, or the actual techniques and practices that a designer must inherit and employ in order to execute the theme of processes overtime. Waldheim poses the question of how exactly is a designer supposed to conceptualize different urban geographies that function at different scales and incorporate a multitude of players? In his view, he argues for a vast reconsideration of traditional conceptual, representational and operative techniques. “The possibilities of vast scale shifts across both
time and space, working synoptic maps alongside the intimate recordings of local circumstances, comparing cinematic and choreographic techniques to spatial notation, etc. seem integral to any real and significant practice of synthetic urban projection.”\(^\text{14}\) From the perspective of the aforementioned James Corner, a reordering of categories in the built environment is the only way we can escape our present predicament in “the cul-de-sac of post-industrial modernity, and the bureaucratic and uninspired failings of the planning profession concern in recent years.”\(^\text{15}\) In other words, he affirms a more interdisciplinary, informal, flexible and equal approach to answering questions about urbanization systems and relationships, in which landscape architecture is not just used to provide an artificial, scenographic, or natural screening for environments.

Overall, these themes of landscape urbanism that encompass the relatively recent rebranding of landscape architecture as a whole call into question a more expansive and broader topic of where exactly these new ideologies are integrated within the city or urban design operation. This change in static to dynamic thinking when considering a work at the urban scale essentially marks a new advancement in the urbanistic design implementation; evolving from a compositional to a process based design in which landscape place an integral part. Anita Berrizbeitia, landscape author, theorizes that process based practices are a “contemporary requisite of large and complex sites.”\(^\text{16}\) She specifically focuses on the development of large urban park projects, and asserts that their design should remain open ended, due to their fundamental complex and diverse systems that respond to various processes often resulting in a long completion timeline (i.e. economic growth and decay, evolving ecologies, shifts in demographics and changes in aesthetic sensibilities). Large urban parks are special in that they conform to the eb and flow of urban circumstances, absorbing and projecting a city’s identity, and becoming adaptable and socially dynamic, emergent sites.\(^\text{17}\) Thus, the urban planner faces a manifested dichotomy, a constant struggle in which they must make a visually powerful and irreproducible project, yet have it remain transformative and flexible, never stagnant; focusing as much if not more on future conditions than present use. Berrizbeitia highlights four key changes that should be implemented within urban design methodology in order to establish a process


\(^\text{15}\) Ibid.


\(^\text{17}\) Ibid.
based approach. Firstly, understanding the dynamic nature of materials, and how compositions are created based on existing systems rather than balance, hierarchy and regularity of external forms (how they can be organized as fields, gradients, corridors etc. to facilitate connectivity, ecological function program and phenomenological perception. Secondly, intrinsically dedicating more time to site research, and broadening the scope to incorporate economic interests, demographics, migration patterns, toxicity, politics, etc. Thirdly, changing the view of history as a reference for form or style but rather as process itself, and defining the site as much by its accumulated histories as its visible physical qualities (topography, vegetation, drainage, etc.). Lastly and most importantly, anticipating change, and worrying less about permanence and more about how to accommodate growth and adaptation.  

Effectively, this entails that “the engaged dynamic condition of landscape, materials, forms and character reflects its processes of making” (ecology becomes fundamental as a set of contingent and not fully predictable relationships between organisms) and that the aspects of organization and layout encompass a layering of multiple forms together, as the complexities, histories and often contradictory programs are distributed equally, non hierarchical.  

Looking at the Bois de Boulogne public park in Paris as an early example, the NE and SW drive cut through the park in order to connect surrounding neighborhoods to key avenues, and more localized roads connect major programs to adjacent neighborhoods, resulting in an overlaid network of multiple paths that engage internal spaces of forest and garden. One of the earliest projects that revealed the potential for process based design and landscape architecture to operate as an urban model was proposed by European architects in the Parc de La Villette competition in Paris, 1982. The prompt for the competition was to manifest “an urban park for the 21st century. “The competition for la Villette began “a trajectory of large public projects in which landscape was conceived as a complex medium capable of articulating relations between urban infrastructure, public events, and indeterminate urban futures for large post-industrial sites.” Essentially, both the winner and the runner up, Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas, signaled the role that landscape would play later on as a means through which to articulate a layered, nonhierarchical, strategic urbanism. Both schemes posed a promising form of

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
landscape urbanism, constructing horizontal and infrastructural fields that could accommodate all kinds of urban activities, both planned and unplanned, overtime. Rem Koolhaas and his firm, OMA, especially wanted to explore the juxtaposition of unplanned relationships between various park programs through parallel strips of landscape. Therefore, according to cultural geographer David Harley, this competition garnered a “socially just, politically emancipatory, and ecologically sane mix(es) of spatio-temporal production processes,” as the focus turns towards an understanding of process and history rather than form and geometry.22

Another, more recent example of process based design in landscape urbanism comes from James Corner and Stan Allen through the Toronto Downsview Park project in the year 2000. Here, the park was integrated into the city by a topographical strategy that facilitated movement through the site, and created different types of flows cutting through and connecting city, park and region.23 Through the network of meadow ways, and flows of wildlife ecologies that contrasted with the internal, closed park programs, they introduce a gradient of different public vs private scales simultaneously, and a series of superimposed independent layers that adapt to changing conditions overtime. A variety of spatial conditions are integrated into the urban infrastructure, blending into the urban fabric through the expansion of circulation patterns. Process is also utilized for phenomenological, aesthetic and programmatic effects, as it looks to stimulate subjective and personal engagement with color, texture, spatiality, etc. berthing from the growth and decay of the landscape itself. Within this project, calculated locations of powerful sensory experiences (i.e. the series of water collecting basins, the variety of soils and ecological communities, grading patterns, etc.) and the absence of railings really foster a closer body-to-landscape interface with varying spatialities.24 Ultimately, in an era where, historically speaking, cities were built as economic machines and as block structures, with the public realm left as residue, integrating landscape into the urban design process helps us reimagine the contemporary city of the 21st century as a living, adaptable, breathable and dynamic society.25

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24 Ibid.
III. Process Based Design at the Building Scale

Thus far, through this investigation and case study examples, irrefutable progress and advancement so far as landscape as a model for urban development has become clearly evident. However, when discussing landscape urbanism and process based design within the context and scale of a building, evidence starts to become more scarce. The establishment and presence of landscape urbanism predominantly occurs within large urban cities (like Paris) or large, public urban projects (Downsview Park, La Villette) at the city scale. Nevertheless, there is work to be done at the personal, human scale of a building. This adaptable, interdisciplinary form of practice has not reached its full extent and it is apparent, through rare and exemplary projects, that the changes in design methodologies for urbanism that Berrizbeitia introduces, can surpass the boundaries of landscape architecture and urban planning and be translated and integrated into the field of traditional architecture, and buildings. For example, Snohetta’s Oslo National Opera and Ballet House in Norway is highly characterized as having strongly identifiable themes that link together to create a highly historic and cultural expression with respect to its site. The office of Snohetta states, “Its low slung form become a link within the city rather than a diverse cultural expression. Its accessible roof and broad, open public lobbies make the building a social monument rather than a sculptural one.”

The building’s roof scheme was a prominent and heavily thought out element of the project since its conception, as the roof’s architectural promenade not only acts to facilitate connectivity, but inclusively adjusts to the climate’s seasonal changes (the setting of snow and ice along the roof ramp define and alter its form, inviting visitors to climb the roof year round, each time experiencing a new, dynamic and unexpected ‘urban field’). In a sense, the site is literally defined by the landscape’s naturally occurring complex and dynamic processes overtime. Moreover, the Oslo Opera House becomes part of the city’s revitalization strategy, looking to redevelop the city’s historically industrial waterfront into open, active and transformative public space.

Even the building's interior evokes themes of fluidity and open-endedness, as the interior design and furnishing pieces provide an informal quality responding to the fluid forms of public space. For instance, all the seating areas are modular and movable, allowing for different arrangements as well as promoting and maximizing comfort. The building’s adaptive nature is also reflected in the

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27 Ibid.
materiality of the lobby’s bathrooms, as the perforated cladding walls allows the visitors visual perception of the lobby areas to change overtime (the diamond like filigree performs differently in accordance with the circulation and movement of the space, changing color and scales when passing alongside the walls).  

As a result, the Oslo Opera House can serve as a microcosm of process based design at the building level, encompassing the major qualities and characteristics of landscape urbanism at a smaller scale (primarily the ideas of prioritizing adaptability and growth over permanence, valuing the site’s accumulated and persistent historical patterns, and an understanding of the dynamic nature of material). Evidently, the principles of landscape urbanism, and more specifically, a process based design approach, can be applied at a smaller scale to architectural profession of designing buildings. In Berrizbeitia’s words, the work view the entire scope “as a living arena of processes and exchanges over time, allowing new forces and relationships to prepare the ground for new activities and patterns of occupancy.”

IV. Redefining Place

Landscape urbanism discourse, and the dialogue created through the development of process based design, across all of the architects and projects that we have visited, sparks a deeper conversation about the relationship between process and place. The traditional understanding of place in landscape architecture, and across many similar professions, entailed chiefly aesthetic frameworks demonstrating physical qualities and character of a site. Thus, the conventional definition of place was purely visual, singular and static. However, with the social and cultural renewal of landscape architecture at the turn of the century as an instrument to unpack and tackle increasingly complex urban systems (and briefly as an instrument through which to advance and evolve the smaller scales of buildings), the notion of place was challenged. As landscape architects expanded their scope of interest and methodologies (i.e. process based design, the working or operational methods), developing their own architectural language and becoming aware of the dynamic complexity of their integrated systems, the very meaning of place experienced a revolution. Place has now become “the result of a dialectic relationship between individuals and physical space in which individuals or institutions shape

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places that in turn shapes them through social practices that occur within them." Place becomes a more constant, gradual, expansive and experiential phenomena, encompassing more than just the pure dimension of the present. As evident within the case studies, place is constructed in this context as mediating ground between unbound landscape and body. Here, place connects with process on a multitude of levels due to the fact that at the very core of process based design is what makes a place recognizable and memorable in the 21st century. Ingrained within this new progressive wave are the very elements that construct the new definition of place in the modern day; "the legibility of the various forces at work, the inclusion of past traces left on the land, expression of environmental change, accommodation of multiple scales, the commitment to diversity, and the determination to adapt existing forms to new social practices." Thus, an architectural project or endeavor that becomes malleable, that bends and flexes, that empowers the user, that garners dynamic relationships and evokes elements of transcedency and recurring dualities, that is a project that will prevail, regardless of the scale, because ultimately, contingency and change are the most powerful tools in highlighting a place’s enduring qualities and its legacy.

***Disclaimer: for final, will add pictures and diagrams of projects described within research paper to provide clarity and visual aid***

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31 Ibid.
V. Bibliography


