Landscape Ethics: What values govern our decision making, and how does a landscape ethic permeate what we do?

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Abstract: *In terms of the development of the urban form, there is an association between economic discourse, political rhetoric, and landscape architecture that is initiated by planning legislation, and demanded by market forces. This being the case, the debate about how these interactions serve to produce the ideal urban space is worthy of consideration. Thought should be given to the physical form that is created by the process, the quality of space that is occupied by the resident, and the cost/benefit to the community of that space, in terms of economic, social, and environmental impacts. It is insufficient to prescribe a linear causal link between an improved urban pattern and a more coherent society. Rather a possibility exists for allowing a dynamic relationship between the two that is underpinned by a landscape ethic. This paper asks the question. What is the Landscape Architect's role in the development of the suburban form? What values govern our decision making, and how does a landscape ethic permeate what we do?*

Keywords: *ethics, decision-making, economics*

Introduction

The idea that a landscape ethic exists is not a controversial or new proposition when considering the number of professions that deal with the values that govern our use of the landscape. To define a landscape ethic is a little more difficult, although terms such as sustainability, and cultural identity offer a sense of clarity amongst landscape professionals. According to the Oxford Dictionary, ethics is 'a science of human duty in its widest extent'. The scientific discourse is a widely accepted paradigm of landscape management, which lends a natural bias towards an ethic focussing environmental management. More recent attempts to define a landscape ethic have also sought to combine cultural and natural values with a responsibility to inform the wider community of those values. (Golding A 2003)

This paper argues that a landscape ethic exists within the context of social, economic, and environmental values. But decision makers outside of the landscape profession do not consider the idea of a landscape ethic. A result of this is that true cost of development of the landscape is still underrepresented, undervalued, and misunderstood.

This paper endeavours to:

a. Recognise the dominance of economic language in the decision making process, and its effect on design outcomes,
b. Clarify (as a professional body) how we may begin to explore what a landscape ethic is, and through this process,
c. Legitimate the idea of a landscape ethic through a participatory process.

The landscape architecture profession has a responsibility to advocate the idea of an ethic in the decision making process through which urban development will directly consider the values promoted by our profession.

The idea of a Landscape Ethic.

The origins of the landscape ethic could arguably be prehistoric, as it is an expression of human association with the environment. So what is this landscape ethic, what does it include and how does it permeate what we do?

Sustainability

Sustainability is an ever-present notion that guides decision makers when they consider how the landscape should be used. Sustainable development is defined in planning legislation in all states in Australia, yet little guidance is offered to applying the legislation in policy design (Bates 2002). The result of this poor drafting emphasizes sustainable development as one of a number of considerations, when in fact the principles of sustainable development demand that it is the balance between development and environmental considerations(Bates 2002). Sustainability is not a late twentieth century notion borne out of environmental consciousness. McHarg suggests that 'members of aboriginal societies could promise their children the inheritance of a physical environment at least as good as had been inherited by them.' (McHarg 1969) Certainly in western society this concept is so irrevocably removed from our capacity to use the landscape, it fundamentally challenges our definition of intergenerational equity. (Which begs the question what is sustainable development)

Cultural identity

Cultural identity has been expressed in the landscape by the physical manipulation and interpretation of nature. Expressions of man and nature were critical to sixteenth Century explorations of symbolic humanism in landscapes such as villa de Medici and Poggio a Cajano. During the Baroque period, Versailles was the pinnacle of this expression of an orderly worldview. The English eighteenth century picturesque movement created an idealised nature, and became an unlikely precursor to the modern view of an ecological landscape. (Dixon-Hunt 1975) Kent, Repton and Capability Brown created the idealised image of the English landscape we see today, and while some of their methods lacked the understanding of integrated ecological systems, they gave nature a currency. (McHarg 1969) The natural environment was a garden, and nature itself was the greatest gardener. The natural expression of the landscape created an aesthetic, which had social value. Olmsted was a notable

advocate of the English landscape tradition in the US; he believed Central Park was a necessary respite from the urban squalor of working class New York. It was a remedy to the disequilibrium in living standards for citizens of an otherwise free and civilised democracy. However the colonisation of the West had occurred and the exploitation of the landscape for economic prosperity was not going to be altered by Olmsted's work. (McHarg 1969)

<u>The landscape resource</u>

The landscape as a resource is a dominant paradigm which reflects how we organise society. Without resource exploitation, there would have been no organised economic system we recognise today. New world countries such as the United States and Australia grew on a post-agrarian economy where creating a standard of living was contingent on the exploitation of resources. Today's landscape records this history, cultural values, and the competing preferences individual's rights the land they occupy. What we do with the landscape today has its origins in these values. During the post world war two period, the growth of capitalist democracies, and increased Government stewardship on behalf of the citizen has seen the legislative process significantly impact on the development of the landscape. Planning, heritage, and environmental protection legislation are the tools available for assessing and identifying how the landscape value is expressed. Policy is designed, and the impact of that design is borne out in the built form.

Landscape Values

The landscape ethic is nothing new, and Landscape Architects have the opportunity to support and promote this ethic. However, to do this requires a consensus about the landscape values that underpin this ethic. The values of sustainability, identity, ecology, and profitability, occupy a place in our collective consciousness, and compete for legitimacy. However these values are interpreted outside non-design centred professions. The language of decision making (and in particular economics) is used to interpret landscape values. The consequence is that decisions are made, and the subsequent suburban form is an expression of a balance of social environmental and economic priorities.

The discourse of triple bottom line accountability in decision-making implies an equal weighting between social, environmental and economic values. Importantly the language of economics (particularly neo-classical) infuses the discourse of environmentalism and social consciousness. This is important to consider because the specific qualities of economic rhetoric are explicit in the discourse of decision-making and policy design. Neo-classic economic theory is finite, measurable, and exchangeable. Economics recognises costs and benefits, boundaries are defined and values are apportioned through debates between efficiency and equity. Economic language identifies risk and reward; invariably those who undertake risk do so in anticipation of a reward equal to or in excess of the value of the risk. Therefore the outcomes of decisions focus on the return to the stakeholder who seeks a return from the initial investment, which in the case of the development of the suburbs, is the landowner the developer and the builder.

Economic values

Neo-classical economic theory would argue that the landscape experience is a commodity, which can be apportioned a value by the market. When values are measurable and tradeable they are recognised by the market, while those that cannot be are not valued. They are neither positive nor negative but simply an externality of the activity of development. This valuation is problematic, as the landscape scene is a public good and an externality of development. Firstly the landscape scene is an externality, and positive externalities are undervalued because the creator of the externality does not receive the benefit he/she creates, where as negative externalities are under-accounted because the creator does not pay the true cost that he/she imposes. (Abelson, 2003) Secondly the landscape is a public good, that is, the view of a landscape cannot be defined as a saleable unit and cannot exclude individuals who have not paid for the experience. So measuring the value of a landscape is inherently difficult. It depends largely on the intended purpose for the valuation in the first place.

If the purpose of quantifying a landscape experience is to replace or restore damaged landscapes, or create a new landscape experience to replace lost landscapes, values can be apportioned. An neo-classical argument would suggest the value of the landscape experience is apportioned by the consumers demand to live in, and enjoy the landscape in question. This argument is flawed, as a perfect pricing of a landscape experience requires a perfectly competitive market and perfect supply of information to the consumer, both of which are neither possible nor desirable by the seller of the experience.

A Market Approach to Landscape Values

The hierarchy of decision makers in the planning process undertake a cost benefit analysis of their intervention and the implications of these decisions. These require a careful consideration of the inclusions in the list of positive and negative externalities. A Planning Minister may consider the economic benefits to government and weight them up against the social cost to existing residents. A town planner may look at the benefits of a well-designed street pattern as well as maintaining a yield that will maximise a return to his/her client. He/she will weight that up against the increased infrastructure costs, as well as considering the impacts of air and water pollution. A developer will identify the potential revenue from the sale of the blocks of land and weight that up with the cost of purchase and compliance. The builder will identify the building that will maximise his/her return against the cost of construction. The homeowner will take into consideration what the market has to offer for the money they can afford to spend.

To borrow economic speak again: all things being equal (*ceteris parabis*) the competitive market model of decision-making should produce the ideal suburban form. This of course doesn't, because the market ignores values that are not governed by market forces. Consequently, decision makers are obliged to take into consideration economic, social and environmental values when considering the overall impact of development. Where these values are not recognised by the market they are incorporated through legislation as a condition of development. In theory this

goes some way to assigning a value to the landscape by society through the democratic process. A constraint on development may be assigned by the maximum tolerance decided through a planning process (Price, M. 2000, p36). That might include the least preservation of the existing landscape experience (endemic trees, landforms, views) and the creation of the most tolerable new landscape experience, (block densities, roof profiles, facades, built forms). This apportions a finite value, which includes both political and economic interests that often override aesthetic values. Because a view or a scene is a public good that is not quantified, then to argue for the preservation or creation of an absolute minimum landscape experience based on aesthetic values is difficult to defend on economic grounds.

Environmental Values

Prior to 1970 there was scant knowledge of the scientific value of the environment in the planning process. (McHarg 1992,p 44) Since then, those promoting environmental values have fought to gain legitimacy in decision making. More recently environmentalists have adopted the language of economics to engage in the decision making process. This is a relatively new approach to the management and protection of the environment. It originated from indirect protection of environmental values to protect the economic interests of landholders, and their right to economic certainty. The difficulty faced by legislators has been the need to strike a balance between the rights of individuals versus the public interest in environmental protection. (Bonehady. 1992,p17) Governments have a range of incentive measures available to them to achieve this balance. These range from the provision of information, to tax incentives through to binding legislation. Legislation introduces compliance conditions on development, which have made environmental values finite and measurable, and exchangeable. The argument for protection of the environment through legislation has motivated governments to accept a more cooperative approach to decision making. The recognition of some quantitative environmental value of a landscape can be interpreted by the amount of compensation paid to landowners to protect an environmental resource. However the true cost of development of the landscape is still underrepresented, undervalued, and misunderstood.

Social Values

Social values are less finite, but no less informative when considering landscape values. Social capital can be defined as: how well we connect up as social beings. It is an attempt to quantify social good (Cox 2003). It is well recognised that identifying social capital can help local economic development and improve the productive potential of a community (Roe 2001, p54). A positive environment produces mentally and physically healthier individuals, which creates a more productive work force (Cox 2003).

The social consequence of suburban development is the creation of communities, which exist as a variety of networks of social relations. Collaboration among these groups is now seen as an effective tool for identifying and resolving social issues concerned with daily life (Roe 2001, p56). This collaboration increases a sense of

democratic empowerment for the individual, who is not otherwise concerned with matters of decision-making about where they live. The challenge is finding out ways of collaboration amongst the members of a community so as to identify the different priorities of those concerned. The consultative process is a mode of collaboration, which produces good policy (Catt 2002).

Social Capital

The landscape is the shared space where we live. The design of this space is central to fostering social capital. The challenge is to find a legitimate, enduring and stable way to co-exist in these spaces. (Roe 2001, p66) The recent work by Michael Woolcock at the World Bank identifies different types of social capital, and by exploring the definition of these modes of creating social capital we can draw some interesting parallels with landscape design.

Bonding social capital is a term that defines the strong links between familiars, often a geographically based community that is fairly homogeneous. (Cox 2003) A good landscape can create a sense of place, drawing on a cultural or natural connection to a site. This may be through choice of plant material, but also the selection of building materials. Additionally the pattern of the landscape could be sufficiently distinctive to develop a distinctive landscape value. However, this homogenisation risks social exclusion and elitism created by the 'estate' mentality to suburb development.

Bridging social capital involves dealing with different groups within a geographic area, or it may be with group's whose interests and activities overlap. The community ideal of an environmentally sustainable landscape or a common desire for a safe living environment can be fostered through the pattern of the suburban landscape. Landscape design can consider the creation of spaces in the landscape, and the visual and physical permeability of these spaces. Environmental aspects include whether adequate space is afforded for a suitable variety of tree to grow, the localisation of stormwater management in neighbourhood wetlands, or the orientation of buildings to increase communal surveillance. These aspects of design are good arguments for fostering social capital. Cox defines a third mode of fostering social capital, which clarify's how the first two may be achieved, as linking social capital. (Cox 2003) This involves communities and public interest groups interacting with institutions such as government.

Social capital is difficult to define, or at least to gain consensus amongst commentators, equally it is often criticised as political rhetoric with no substance, it is however here to stay and the reason for this is that it is recognised world wide as a necessary component of a country's wealth. Unlike output, consumption and productivity, it is difficult to measure, therefore difficult to sell to an agency with an economic as well as social agenda. For the benefit of this argument I will contend that the building of social capital is inherent in the building of a community, and that the building of such a community begins at the policy stage and in theory does not end. The question Landscape Architects should ask themselves is whether the decisions they make foster or inhibits social capital.

Landscape Architects as Agents of Participation

To legitimise the value of a landscape ethic in a development project requires a collaborative participatory approach. The landscape architect can be both a respondent and an agent of public participation. When a landscape architect is a respondent of public participation he/she is a part of a representative group. Yet his/her response is one of many (or in many cases few). Consultation that seeks responses from persons affected by a decision is equivalent to that of a person who is aggrieved by a decision, which sets up an adversarial process. The lobby group in this case promotes their own landscape value. These groups are passionate, and deeply affected by the consequences of development and historically include conservationists and environmentalist not protagonists and place makers. Their efforts have changed legislation, and affected the process of development. The third type of consultation is the targeted respondent, which seeks to gain the opinion of those with expertise to provide opinion. Catt argues this in fact perpetuates the democratic deficit, as the selection of respondents can be chosen to suit a predetermined outcome. (Catt 2002) In this case the landscapes values risk being suppressed by vested interests and commercial considerations. Yet it is the major role played by the landscape architecture profession in suburban development.

Identifying a Good Landscape Ethic

Landscape ethics incorporate all of these values, but sit along side them when decisions are made. That is landscape ethics have no value in decision making outside of social, environmental and economic discourse. Systematic treatment of the landscape is not built into democratic political models, and efforts to bring environmental management into mainstream policy making is ideologically driven and ad hoc. It is not part of the core business of government. (Marshall B 1999, p57) As a result the value placed on the landscape in which we live is a tool of negotiation between stakeholders who's the primary concern is the maximum benefit for the largest share stakeholder. The consequence of this is seen in the pattern of suburbs, which are a living archive of the political ideology of the day. This denies the end users (the public) a feeling of self-determination. (Catt 2002) It promotes cynicism about tokenism, and a level of historical eclecticism, which is cynically exploited by mock federation facades, street furniture and lights.

This highlights two important questions of landscape values when considering landscape development. Does the role of Landscape Architects on a consulting team for a development extends beyond responding to a set of social, economic, and environmental criteria to fulfil a brief? Secondly, when landscape architects find themselves working in careers designing policy for landscape development; who is to decide what policy produces a good landscape ethic? This requires collaboration and cooperation with disciplines whose primary interest is not the resulting visual form created by development.

Conclusion

History will show that the beginning of the twenty first century is an information revolution. As agents of change we can no longer accept the possibility that well-intentioned actions are in hindsight poorly thought out through lack of information. Today the choice we make is to seek the appropriate information at our disposal to make the most informed decisions. The skill we now require is accessing that information. Dialogue with the community, design that responds to the changing values of society, participation in decisions about planning that ensure the landscape values are recognised.

Aldo Leopold suggested that, 'a land ethic, can not prevent the alteration, management and use of these 'resources', but it does affirm their right to continued existence.'(Leopold, 1964). Each decision about the modification of the landscape whether it is for residential development or any other resource use, needs to be considered in the light what is right as well as what is profitable. Landscape architects are partners in the development of suburban spaces, and their role can be defined by the outcomes of their design. The question is, are these ideas a product of a collaborative decision making process or a response to a range of problems presented by the planning process? I believe we have a role to play in organising the competing claims of stakeholders into a coherent mutually beneficial outcome that is underpinned by a landscape ethic.

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