



Space, Time—and Culture: landscape architecture as an agent of acculturation in the postmodern world?

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abstract

New Conversations with an Old Landscape: landscape architecture in contemporary Australia (2002, Images Publishing) argued that through their practice, landscape architects aid or abet the process of acculturation. That argument was built on the premise that their capacity to converse with and interpret the particularities of each site and locale, empowers landscape architects to demonstrate how Australians might better adapt to the physical and cultural characteristics of their continent rather than always looking elsewhere for what are, often, ill-suited models. Thus landscape architects are inextricably linked to their cultural context—both local and global.

Given the modern era's pre-occupations with space and particularly time (ergo Gideon's axiomatic *Space, Time and Architecture*), propositions like these that locate cultural agency and acculturation within landscape architecture's professional ethos, root the profession in Australia in the postmodern, rather than modern era, an era characterised by spatial and temporal compression and global culture. Localised or place-based practice is posited as a much-needed counterbalance to the dominant trends towards technical standardisation and spatial homogenisation. Indeed *New Conversations* ... promoted the value of such practice to the region and the world.

This paper, however, critically reviews this position with its focus on cultural and physical specificities. Is it effective in the broader cultural context of globalisation? Should it really have wider currency in the region?

The review suggests the urgent need for the profession to develop additional capacities to effect positive change in its global and regional context, particularly the rapidly developing eastern region whose fate during the next century will seal the fate of the world's landscapes. Rather than focussing, as it has, on the local, landscape architecture must also embrace the theory and practice of the global—enhancing its capacity to contribute to the process of acculturation and adaptation at all the scales that characterise our era. It must be a master of both.

Introduction

Purposefully, the title of this talk, “Space, time—and culture: Landscape architecture as an agent of acculturation in the post-modern world” starts with the concepts of space and time. It does this because of the way that both were reconceptualized during the twentieth century as agents of modernism, and because the compression of space and time is now the dominant characteristic of this, the twenty-first, and postmodernism century.

This paper argues for a re-positioning of landscape architectural education and practice, in Australia and elsewhere, to confront the realities and the unavoidable challenges that are consequent on this position. It particularly, addresses the challenges arising from the internationalisation of practice.

All of us are familiar with the adage “think globally, act locally”¹, coined in the 1970s to express the need to understand the broader reach of decisions about local environments, their impacts on the world at large and the reverse. It called for broader awareness from us all and indeed the interim period of 30 years has provided us with almost all that is needed to do exactly that; to think globally. Electronic media including the world-wide web, television and email, cheap and rapid international travel and the continuing reach of global, capitalist and democratic culture into previously closed domains including China, the Eastern European states and the former Soviet Union, have put the world at our doorstep. In parallel this has also been a period of unprecedented environmental degradation and urbanisation consequent on changing work patterns, immigration and population growth. In the adult lives of most of us here, the world has become, as Marshall McLuhan predicted, a kind of “global village” where everything is everyone’s business². But let us pause and consider what that has meant for professional practice, something that most of you know and experience on a daily basis.

Ethically and practically, most practitioners are now challenged to act responsibly, and professionally, not just locally or even regionally, but globally, in a market place characterised by unprecedented rates of change. Increasingly international in their work, practitioners in our family of disciplines traverse regional and national boundaries on a regular basis to give advice to clients and work with other professionals in the process. Their work is not only more technical than in the past, I suggest, but more culturally focussed and cross-cultural as a result—whether culture in terms of ethnicity or professional specialisation. And while the challenges of technological progress are always recognised and prepared for, the cultural, while acknowledged, is hardly systematically prepared for by either practice or education.

This is despite the international federations of both architects and landscape architects specifically identifying issues relating to cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary work amongst their core concerns³. Graduates in these disciplines expect, and are expected to work internationally and across disciplines during their professional lives and at a policy level some universities now anticipate all students will include some form of international dimension in their education.

Cultural implications of global practice

The design professions are now party to, and complicit in, the rapid urban and environmental change that characterises our times. And while that practice is often global or international, ultimately its products are local in their manifestation and must accommodate local values, conditions and expectations. The dilemma regularly experienced by practitioners, especially landscape architects with their professional focus on the particularities of place and of social and natural environments,

is that, despite the expectations of local people, their clients in government and commerce often benchmark themselves against global forms and standards of development, expecting these forms to override local conditions and peculiarities. They expect practitioners, whether local or international, to provide rapid, often standardised solutions to diverse and complex problems on sites and territories where the spatial and temporal domains of the postmodern era converge. How then, should planning and design professionals act in such situations, increasingly the everyday condition of their working lives?

My book, *New Conversations with an Old Landscape: landscape architecture in contemporary Australia*⁴, argued that through their practice, landscape architects aid or abet the process of acculturation. That argument was built on the premise that in Australia (and by extension, elsewhere) their capacity to converse with and interpret the particularities of each site and locale, empowers landscape architects to demonstrate how communities might better adapt to the physical and cultural characteristics of their place rather than always looking elsewhere for what are, often, ill-suited models. It infers that landscape architects are inextricably linked to their cultural context—both local and global—and that theirs is, in addition to the technical, a cultural practice. Summarily, they interpret existing and past cultural mores and propose future ones. In Australia, the book suggests, theirs is (in Kenneth Frampton's terminology) an institutionalised form of "critical regionalism". But what, increasingly, of their practice elsewhere?

Given the modern era's pre-occupations with the universality of space and particularly time (ergo Giedion's axiomatic *Space, Time and Architecture*⁵), propositions like these that locate cultural agency and acculturation within landscape architecture's professional ethos, root

the profession in Australia amongst the post-modern, rather than in the modern era, in an period characterised by spatial and temporal compression and global culture. Localised or place-based practice is posited as a much-needed counterbalance to the dominant trends towards technical standardisation and spatial homogenisation. Indeed *New Conversations* ... promoted the value of such practice to the region and the world and locates the formative landscape architectural canon in Australia in the period since 1970, the period when postmodernism is said to have begun (unlike our North American colleagues whose formative canon is decidedly modern in both timing and physical manifestation)⁷.

This paper critically reviews this position—the locating of cultural agency within the professions ethos—and its focus on cultural and physical specificities. Is it sufficient in the broader cultural context of globalisation and specifically, in what has become one of its expressions—current models of global or international practice? Should this proposition really have wider currency in the region and beyond, where so much of the work of Australian landscape architects is now practiced? Is it because of their technical or cultural capacity that Australian landscape architects are in so much demand? Is it because of that very sense of particularity that they bring? Or is it because, simply, they are relatively inexpensive?

Researching the internationalisation of practice

The internationalisation of planning and design practice has been the focus of some action research I and my colleagues in urban design and landscape architecture from the University of Melbourne, Kasetsart University in Bangkok and L'École d'Architecture et Paysage, Bordeaux in France have undertaken over three years from 2003 to 2005. During that period we

focused on the change in urban and landscape design and culture internationally, running two international symposia (involving about 100 presenters) and a series of three international workshops. One workshop was hosted in each location, involving local governments and institutions and including experimental design studios with an approximately equal mixture of landscape architects, urban designers and architects from each participating school. These studios also provided a focus for action research into cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary professional interactions⁶.

This program revealed a number of recognisable elements of contemporary practice, including trends towards design practice characterised by:

- Ü an increasing range of territorial scales (from the neighbourhood to the regional);
- Ü interaction with an increasing range of cultures and geographies;
- Ü an increasingly complex relationship between global phenomena (tourism, (sub-)urbanisation, post-industrialisation) and local conditions;
- Ü increasing landscape and urban degradation; and
- Ü increasing complexity and rapidity of decision-making processes.

In response, the research team suggests practice and education therefore need to provide:

- Ü a greater range of methodological models and precedents to address the increasing range of project types and settings;
- Ü sustained and greater ingenuity/innovation at all scales;
- Ü sustained commitment to retro-fit sites and reverse landscape degradation;
- Ü a greater capacity to engage in complex work, debates and decisions, both cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural.

Participants in the international symposia reflected on and predict in their practice, the continuing convergence of cultures, technologies and patterns of development in regions as a manifestation of global culture. They also experienced, universally, the increasing scale, scope and range of practice and an accompanying complexity.

Despite such complexity, those contributing to the program proposed a positive future, so long as the design professions become more:

- Ü reflective in their practice;
- Ü able to accept and work with “difference” and the “other”;
- Ü fully equipped not only as increasingly expert technical practitioners but also as cultural, and cross-cultural, practitioners;
- Ü able to communicate more effectively by developing “greater dialogues” across diverse groups;
- Ü capable of accessing, analysing and learning from an emerging and increasingly diverse range of international experiences;
- Ü capable of understanding and modelling the processes that manifest in both global and local cultures; and
- Ü knowledgeable about the range of methodological models available to effect change.

Somewhat optimistically and despite the challenges, these design practitioners, irrespective of their origins (which covered all continents), did not appear to accept that global culture need necessarily diminish the diversity and the quality of local life⁷ as is often suggested in the literature on global and environmental change and, indeed, they were able to describe many instances to support their position. They saw our professions as vital in resisting the negative environmental outcomes that characterise our era and were energetically pursuing that goal in a great diversity of situations using any means at their disposal:

traditional, contemporary, local or international, or a customised fusion of all.

Consequent on this experience, I propose that landscape architecture, as practiced in the global domain now requires, as do other professions, an expanded range of skills. This need has direct consequences for both the academy and the profession and how, together, they prepare the professionals of the future. While skills will need to include an expanded range of technical capacities to prevent and re-dress degradation, just as urgently they need increased capacities to navigate more diverse places and cultures and have available a greater range of models of practice to harness and balance the standardising forces that accompany globalisation. With such capacities future professionals may be more equal to the task of turning these forces to advantage, rather than as they often seem to be at present, be at their calling.

Specifically, in addition to their existing and more traditional education to read and operate in local cultures, graduates need greater access to theory about global culture and globalisation and how these forces influence their disciplines. They need to know how to observe and generalise the elements of place and the processes of change that occur, whether ubiquitous (and “every-day”) or exotic (and “different”) at all scales. They need more methods, more examples of application, and greater skills in adapting those methods to the expanding variety of cultural and physical situations that will confront them. Finally, they need to gain real experience in reflective (analytical) practice and learn its value as a skill for practice at any scale⁸. Overall, their education needs to prepare them for their future as professionals who can act expertly and ethically in an increasingly complex global domain, to effect positive change, and in fact, enable survival.

The challenge for professional education

To achieve this degree of preparation we, as educators and as practitioners, need to confront this complexity and work harder to understand it. We need to think more carefully about how practice is responding, internationally, by more systematically analysing its methods and meanings and presenting the results of that research. As educators we need to develop greater skills to think and act in our graduates by providing them with a more diverse range of analytic and conceptual tools based on the successes of research and practice—about technology, about culture in both its global and local forms and the impact of both on landscapes everywhere. All this needs to be systematic and rigorous rather than idiosyncratic, opportunistic and superficial. Our programs should be structured to confront the realities of the contemporary world and the demands of future practice and be re-thought urgently, to those ends.

In response I propose that the profession, led by the AILA, IFLA and the universities in Australia, develop additional capacities in its courses and graduates. Rather than focussing, as it has, primarily on the local, landscape architectural education must also embrace the theory and practice of the global—enhancing its capacity to contribute to the process of acculturation and adaptation at all the scales that characterise our era. It must master them all so it can better effect positive change in its global and regional context, particularly the rapidly developing eastern region, the fate of whose cities and environments during the next century will seal the fate of the whole world’s landscapes.

In summary, our education systems must educate landscape architects to be cultural practitioners who are more informed and creative about both global and local practice,

who not only “think globally and act locally” but “think *and* act globally *and* locally” and have learnt sufficient techniques to do that in an increasingly complex cultural context.

In specific terms each program in landscape architecture now needs to ask itself whether it prepares graduates by teaching them basic capacities in the following domains:

- Ü the ecology of natural and urban systems, and the dynamics of change, at a global, regional and local scale;
- Ü the technologies of conservation, management and construction in the urban, suburban and natural domains (including “sustainable technologies” as they evolve);
- Ü the history and theory of practice including its failures and successes in conserving, managing and constructing natural and urban areas;
- Ü skills in spatial analysis of the processes of change that are manifest as landscapes—globally, regionally and locally; past and present;
- Ü skills in conceptualising future, alternative territories at all scales;
- Ü skills in communicating and practicing as cultural and cross-cultural practitioners across a wide range of territories; and
- Ü the organization, legal framework and ethics of environmental practice, globally and locally.

Clearly such an educational preparation goes well beyond what we currently see as our educational charter, especially after a recent history of higher education in this country that has seen programs struggling to maintain range, depth and capacity in the face of funding cuts and competition. This is even though there is continuing and increasing demand for landscape architects internationally and a world-wide shortage. That very international demand presents education’s immediate challenge, to underpin the profession’s capacity to meet the complexities the global environment presents

and to relieve the practices themselves of the load of educating and training graduates who are insufficiently prepared for the realities of contemporary professional life.

Apart from the issue of increasingly global content that I expect faces programs everywhere (and which I will be presenting shortly at conferences at both CELA in Vancouver and in Rome at an international symposium on landscape architectural education hosted by La Sapienza) the most obvious issues for Australia go to the length of programs and the way in which the domains of technology, precedents and models, ecology, planning and design and communication can be sufficiently covered and integrated coherently and meaningfully.

All programs in Australia are 4 years in length, and their subject matter is loosely overseen by the profession, with varying degrees of rigour. The kind of practice I am saying we must be prepared for nationally, regionally and internationally simply cannot be covered within this time frame and I propose here that the profession considers, in line with Europe where the Bologna model is being progressively implemented, most of North America (and increasingly Asia), graduation after a minimum of 5 years of tertiary education. This would comprise a 3 year base, or undergraduate, degree as a para-professional exit option for those not intending full-blown professional preparation followed by a minimum of 2 years of graduate study to the first professional degree (accredited). For lateral or graduate entry students from other disciplines, the study length would be 3 years of graduate level study at a higher level of delivery and required achievement.

As you will be aware, this is a major change, but one that needs to be seriously considered. It is one we are pursuing at the University of Melbourne with the intention of implementation from 2008. But in its varying forms it is one

that I propose all university programs in Australia embrace while the issue is under debate nationally and the opportunity is there to align with Europe, most of North America and Asia. We can no longer afford to avoid the debate about what really is the appropriate time (and space) for landscape architectural education for our era and must, rather, ensure that graduates and thereby, the profession, are prepared for a professional life by an education that really does prepare them for its contemporary realities. °

Endnotes

- 1 "Think Globally, Act Locally refers to the argument that global environmental problems can turn into action only by considering ecological, economic, and cultural differences of our local surroundings. This phrase was originated by Rene Dubos as an advisor to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972. In 1979, Dubos suggested that ecological consciousness should begin at home. He believed that there needed to be a creation of a World Order in which "natural and social units maintain or recapture their identity, yet interplay with each other through a rich system of communications". In the 1980's, Dubos held to his thoughts on acting locally, and felt that issues involving the environment must be dealt with in their "unique physical, climatic, and cultural contexts." (Eblen and Eblen, 1994, p. 702)" Downloaded from http://capita.wustl.edu/ME567_Informatics/concepts/global.html, 12/05/06
- 2 McLuhan, M. (1969), *The Medium is the Message*, Random House, New York
- 3 See website of the International Federation of Landscape Architects, www.ifla.net
- 4 Bull, C. (2002), *New Conversations with an Old Landscape: landscape architecture in contemporary Australia*, Images Publishing, Melbourne.
- 5 Giedion, S. (1967), *Space, Time and Architecture: the growth of a new tradition*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- 6 For the full reports on these symposia and the teaching research, see (2 symposia proceedings) plus the 10th edition of *Urban Design International*, Palgrave Macmillan, December 2004.
- 7 See Dear, M.J. (2000), *The postmodern urban condition*, Maldon Mass, Blackwell, and Solomon, D. (2003), *Global city blues*, Washington DC, Island Press.
- 8 See Schon, D.A. (1995), *The Reflective Practitioner: how professionals think in action*, Aldershot, England, Arena.