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Landscape Architecture and Environmental Goals; Challenges in an Increased Urban Society

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New challenges for a landscape architecture and a landscape development

I want to start this presentation by stating the following: There is probably a possibility to live a good life based on an indoor life or a life mainly linked to an inner city without so much green. However, it would be a waste to invite me to talk about this. There are other professionals who are much more experienced in that part of research and life. Moreover, I have no problem to recognize what I consider as wonderful examples of landscape architecture in these contexts.

What I could react against is if someone believes that landscape architecture should be limited or primarily about this, serving just or primarily an inner city culture. Very often in such situations we technically and economically today can create completely new conditions and erase the origin conditions in a way that the former landscape features are not possible to recognize any longer. Concepts, which use the hedge as the definition of a real garden are often used today, but can be a trap, becoming introvert in a way, totally forgetting the possibility to correspond to the landscape out there. Similar: Planning systems, which always place the power-full buildings in the centre, too easy make nature and landscape become transformed into a backside position. I want to focus other concepts stressing the landscape perspective and also other important contexts, which very little were caught in the twentieth century.

In the twentieth century the landscape architects, often started processes which were meant to be fixed to a certain development, and consequently very poor in flexibility; a flexibility which could stimulate coming generations to involve. The processes that were started through landscape architecture projects also most often were poor in biodiversity richness and the green spaces were not intended to live long and grow in capacity over a long time. Consequently, regarding its relationship to landscape and the use of a sound ecology skill, I sometimes call this the "artificial environment", and I want to leave this to someone else and instead stress the values that can be found and created on the other side of the square, bridging in between the city and the countryside, and using the landscape and its dynamic as a base or backbone in the design.

I wish to discuss how landscape architecture can contribute in a society that is changing dramatically, and where borders as separations in between city and countryside, culture and nature, ecology and landscape architecture or past-present-future too easy becomes a trap in our way to act. This presentation is particularly focused on how landscape architecture can contribute to the human being and her relationship to the landscape as a physical environment and a mental human construction of meaning.

An increased urban society and some consequences for landscape architecture

The urban society expands its domains, and the urban attitudes and relationships to the surrounding landscape and nature is not only a matter concerning city people and their relationship to a surrounding landscape in skills, attitudes and uses. In many European countryside landscapes more than 80% of the people, and sometimes much more, are living in the countryside, but they have their job and outcome in the city. Very few are farmers or foresters. Of course there are many advantages in this development, otherwise it would not be the case that urbanization would be so successful, but there are, no doubt, aspects it bring which worries not only me; aspects which one should reflect about and challenge as important when

wanting to make a landscape architecture meaningful for future and, useful in contexts which go much further than market places, small gardens and conventional parks. Such problematic aspects and aspects to challenge could be such as follow below. Rather than to limit the discussion to “disadvantages” and “dangerous” aspects I try to show alternatives which already today exist, and also give examples of how landscape architecture could adapt.

1. *The indoor culture will increase, and will make us uncomfortable when we are outdoors.* If for generations, we can start to speak about a new “sub-species”; “the indoor or urban sub-species”. Parallel, we can see another trend. In Sweden the health problem has increased with about 300% during the last two decades. Overweight problems have been raised and are still raising among children. During the last decade the financial costs for taking care of depressed people have doubled. Far from everything is related to too much sitting, inactivity living, and indoor being, but much is. Recreation researchers show how the length of outdoor walks has diminished to less than half an hour. It could be expected that people will change habits, and that “society” will try to convince and facilitate for more outdoor being. Scandinavian doctors earlier recommended half an hour, but have rethought. Today they recommend not less than one hour, and it should be regular. Daycare for children have created new concepts like “Ur och skur-daghem” (“Out also in rain and storm-daycare”), and it has been shown that those which have let the children be out particularly much have figures of how children get much less sick and get less allergic problems. Patrik Grahn and his research group at SLU-Alnarp have shown the importance for children of nature in the direct surroundings for their mobility but also for harmony and creativity. This argues for more political pressure and public attention to come for outdoor landscapes with variety, adventurous qualities, traditional natural, cultural or garden qualities of high standard; landscapes, which can be reached from the doorstep. This is also the place in the presentation where we should reflect of the design process of today as something done indoors. How would it change if the creative thinking and the design rather happened outside. With two Tjeckien landscape architects as pilotes I did a test in a three years program, and the results show interesting parts, in the way to integrate the design into a place-given concept, adapting to dynamics and natural processes, and in the way it lead to a dialogue with users, and could handle complexity.
2. *The observing (and analyzing) culture. The alienation between the human being and landscape.* Think about two lovers and their relationship, or a garden owner and her garden and what happens if you stay passive or stay as an observer. The positive strength in the relationship fades sooner or later. In the agrarian culture there was always a close relationship between man and nature, and man was intervening in natural processes, and the cultural characteristics were very much belonging to a natural and a production-giving world, which more or less always were strongly linked to the local and regional landscape. The urban society almost per definition means that man gets separated from nature, “experts” do the job and you should not bother. Actually, you are not allowed to interfere with the landscape. You are allowed to observe. Indirectly this too easily leads to a sense of outsidership, not belonging to, and not being responsible to. The doing becomes separated from the controlling and the people who are good enough educated act more and more separated from the doing and are acting more and more from outside and from a top-down system. You can see landscape architecture in this perspective, allowing to observe, but definitely not wanting an interference in management or in a creative thinking. The spade culture survives in the private gardens but does not any longer include other forms of landscape management for the many. *The wilderness* as an urban concept is spreading all over Europe, linked to a sense of sublime and a new “religion”. Nature becomes “The Otherness” and in school you learn to respect, and you learn names of species, but as an outsider and an observer. The academic training and the increasing power of a conventional research also linked to landscape architecture, landscape planning and landscape management

here support the “observing culture”. There is also much of freshness in the wilderness concept, and a deeper understanding of longer processes which landscape architecture should take advantage of.

3. *The touristic attitude and the thin sense of aesthetics.* Alan Carlson, one of the pioneers in environmental aesthetics, writes about “the thin and the thick sense of aesthetics”. With a thin sense of aesthetics we do not know so much about history, symbolism etc. Our preferences will be based on forms, proportions, colors etc. in a shallow view. These were, according to Carlson, terms which became invented for critics at the birth of modern art. However, all landscape architects also easily recognize the terms as key terms for landscape architecture. It shows how close landscape architecture is to modernism. Probably it should be added that most likely it also shows a too strong reduction of landscape architecture. As a field it should also be relevant for other contexts. In a touristic situation the relationship with a surrounding has to go fast. Forget about complexity and content to be discovered as different layers. “Less is more beautiful” become a truth more than ever before. Flashy elements in an obvious style will be needed if the visitor should react and judge what is good or not within some few seconds, or within the only visit. Day to day landscapes, which win more and more the more you experience them will not get attention. As an alternative Alan Carlson, and many with him shows the respect to experts of natural science, archeology etc. to help us find “the thick” sense of aesthetics. Another of the leading within environmental aesthetics, Marcia Eaton, professor in ethics and aesthetics and the former chairman of the American Aesthetic forum, starts one of her books with: I don’t mind being called beauty...as long as they think it has roots. Personally I think environmental aesthetics offer us an interesting theory, which could improve the landscape architecture and its ability to widen and deepen its possible contribution.
4. *A lot of talk about sustainability in a period characterized by an extreme wish to conquer nature.* In the late 1970ies I got to know *Ian Laurie*, the editor of the classic book “*Nature in Cities*”, and he told how garden architects in England and Europe met the successful Americans at that time rediscovered group of landscape designers who had shifted the name from garden to landscape architect. Olmsted, and Jensen were among them, and characteristic for their work was the strong link to landscape and skills of ecology and landscape engineering, but not only. They often linked it to human sciences as well, and in their parks or landscapes a lot of social happenings. Later MacHarg, Forman and others wanted all physical planning linked to landscape and site conditions. Today, the wish to integrate is often replaced by a wish to challenge and design at the level of what is possible. Housing areas right up to the sea without sheltering green hedges etc. is extremely trendy, and found in most European countries. A relation to a regional identity in style and to site is replaced by a new international post-modernistic style. It might sometimes be more sustainable than earlier but in many cases it rather signalizes the wish to conquer nature and local traditions. In educational programs ecological, landscape and landscape management courses are often replaced by conceptual design courses. In the professional magazine there are articles questioning if the outdoor environment we design really should be called landscape, if it is not too old-fashioned and irrelevant in a society of today; and this is not surprising. It is to be expected in a society which becomes even more urban. It will be interesting to see how a new Landscape Convention in Europe will affect landscape architecture in Europe during the coming decades.
5. *The frozen, static landscape view will more and more replace a dynamic view.* With an increased urban society the view of landscape will be even more frozen and taken out of its dynamic. The French government, in the pre-step of the Landscape Convention, understood the danger or handicap in such a view, and put the dominating resources in

re-photographing projects of different landscapes in France to reduce the loss of a dynamic landscape knowledge in France. In the projects they linked this to interviews of politicians and other actors important for the future landscapes of France. In Sweden one of the major ideas behind the wish to set up two landscape laboratories close to the university campus at SLU-Alnarp was to stress the dynamic dimensions for students and maybe also teachers.

6. *The ideal landscapes will replace the living landscapes, the reconstructed and the direct experienced.* In Great Britain many have stopped to talk about “landscape” because it has become so much linked to academic reconstructions and the categorizing into different ideal landscape types. Instead they talk about city and countryside as the “living and lived landscape”. I can see the use of both collecting a “library of living and lived reference landscapes” which could be important to share within and between different disciplines, and, parallel, to strengthen the skills of ideal landscapes, and how these can be reached. Again, the landscape laboratories and long term studies in associated reference landscapes have meant a lot for teaching in SLU-Alnarp, Sweden.

To be added later:

7. *The conventional landscape will become a result from a conventional start with large plant qualities and standard trees.* An alternative in which we actively search for “landscape characters” will succeed much better to differentiate into characters which are rich and have a good contrast in between them, making it possible to choose also depending of weather and season. In my chapter in the book “The Dynamic landscape” I have tried to develop these thoughts, stressing the woodland interiors, the woodland edge, the wetland and the water front landscapes.
8. *The multi-functional landscape.* The landscape architecture in the twentieth century kept to areas of “pure recreation”, “pure living”, or “pure infra-structure”, and gave no place for a development in contexts of multiple use, gave no chance to overlaps with production output, which could have had economical advantages, but also advantages of a linkage to action and active involvement rather than observing.
9. *The picturesque, the English and German landscape park, the Baroque as “classic styles”.* These are often mentioned as classic styles of yesterday. However, revisiting them, and trying to connect them with today and tomorrow rather than yesterday give them new faces and give us new possibilities. So, rather than always to invent new styles I think we should take the chance to revisit and see them in a new light. Rather than take a perspective of evolution I suggest a perspective of dynamics.

Some conclusions

- The increased urban society might mean a lot of problems, but I am optimistic. I believe we are close to a turning point, in which the reduced and alienated, shallow concepts of landscape in landscape architecture will become something new and deeper, and become developed in many new contexts.
- A development of a special field within landscape design called *communicative design*, stressing the importance to include users and stake-holders in the design, planning and management process.