

EXPLORING

THE

LANDSCAPE

OF

URBAN

DESIGN

High Line
Manhattan's High Line is a transcendent work of landscape architecture and urban design that both literally and figuratively elevates the experience of the city. While the vision of James Corner and Field Operations was instrumental in achieving its realisation, its success is, more importantly, the result of an open and collaborative design process that involved a broad, interdisciplinary urban design team composed of Diller Scofidio and Renfro Architects, Olafur Eliasson, Piet Oudolf and Buro Happold.

Is urban design a discipline in its own right, or simply a useful name for a group of distinct but complementary skills that should remain separate? Tim Waterman considers the future of urban design teaching and where it can take the built environment

OVER THE PAST COUPLE OF years, in the process of writing two introductory textbooks on landscape architecture and urban design and in contributing to the building of the Landscape Institute's I Want to be a Landscape Architect website, I have spent a great deal of time examining the basic precepts of landscape architecture and urban design in an international context. Ours is not a profession that lends itself easily to being described in a nutshell, so this was no mean task. Landscape architecture's great breadth is also its greatest strength, so to a certain extent, it can even be considered counterproductive to attempt to provide a simplified description. My writings have made a modest attempt despite this.

One thing at least is clear, and that is that landscape architecture has undergone a transformation in the past ten or 15 years worldwide. It is now a more confident and relevant field than ever before. There is also a strong sense of empowerment among young practitioners who see design with the landscape as one of humankind's most effective tools with which to combat some of the greatest challenges of our time, from climate change to the coming food crisis. Landscape architecture is the militant wing of geography – we actively shape what others merely assess. /...



1934



2000



2009: Washington Grasslands, aerial view of the High Line over Little West 12th Street

Eroding boundaries

Boundaries between disciplines and professions are eroding. Inter- and multidisciplinary activity is finally being accepted and encouraged – not just as a nice idea, but as a necessity for regenerative thinking and working. Urban design is one area where the well-founded professions in the architectures, including planning, are discovering greater agency and relevance in collaborative, holistic work that is more complex than the traditional scenographic or iconographic work of the ‘starchitect’.

Landscape architects are accustomed to operating across boundaries. Indeed, it would be difficult to find any area of expertise within landscape architecture that falls solely within the purview of landscape architecture. It is the broadness of scope itself that defines the field. Despite this fact, the profession is struggling to emerge from a long period of parochialism. The defensive attitude that has prevailed has manifested itself in inaction and a misplaced sense of shame. This victimhood leads to loud harrumphing whenever, for example, a building architect designs a park (how dare Bernard Tschumi do such a good job designing the Parc de la Villette?). Trying to draw boundaries of this sort is a tremendous expenditure of energy that simply refuels the inferiority complex. Operating across boundaries means we must be prepared to share territory.

When I was a student, I can remember hearing (though not from the best lecturers) that landscape architecture “doesn’t really

have a canon” and that all too often we just “shrub it up and hide mistakes” in the “spaces between buildings”. This is the inferiority complex speaking and it must not be tolerated any longer. Fortunately, this is not a line I hear from students, which indicates that these views are at least not plaguing the next generation. And we do indeed have a canon – one that stretches across a vast range of disciplines, and while not all of it comes from within landscape architecture, it is core to both thought and practice.

Of course, it must be borne in mind that landscape architecture resides within the architectures as a whole and consequently has access and claim to the entire architectural canon. In the 1960s, Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City*, Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Gordon Cullen’s *The Concise Townscape* and Ian McHarg’s *Design With Nature* began to shape our postmodern approaches to design and planning. In the 1970s and 1980s, landscape began to be commonly understood to exist at the intersection of the natural and the cultural through the greater dissemination of the writings of John Brinckerhoff Jackson and from such blockbusters as Nan Fairbrother’s *New Lives, New Landscapes*, Geoffrey Jellicoe’s *The Landscape of Man*, Anne Whiston Spirn’s *The Granite Garden* and John T Lyle’s *Design for Human Ecosystems*. This list is, of course, incomplete, but the glaring omissions only further prove the vigour of the canon.

Two recent books in particular stand out for defining a sea change in all the /...

“MULTIDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITY IS FINALLY BEING ACCEPTED AND ENCOURAGED – NOT JUST AS A NICE IDEA, BUT AS A NECESSITY FOR REGENERATIVE THINKING AND WORKING”



MOTA Seat



Dae Street Furniture available exclusively in U.K. from :

public spaces

mota@publicspaces.eu

Free Number 0808 101 1590



The High Line:
Gansevoort Slow Stair,
corner of Gansevoort
Street and Washington
Street, looking north

architectures, and they are both collections of essays. James Corner's *Recovering Landscape* and Charles Waldheim's *The Landscape Urbanism Reader* have so effectively positioned landscape as the fundamental building block of urbanism that an insistence upon the building as the primary shaper of urban space now seems quaint. Landscape urbanism emerged out of landscape architecture, but only after landscape's 'discovery' by building architects and theorists (such as Peter Rowe, Kenneth Frampton and Rem Koolhaas), who seem to have awoken landscape architecture out of a long slumber into a newly invigorated phase. Landscape practitioners and academics have been empowered by the shift in the field of operation from the confined spaces between buildings, to the working of a continuous horizontal plane across which numerous spatial orders and dynamics play and across which numerous ecologies intersect: human, political, natural and media ecologies to name but a few.

Waldheim, I believe, would insist that landscape urbanism has evolved out of landscape architecture in answer to its traditionally scenographic limitations, and exists as an emergent field separate and additional to landscape architecture. In fact, the speed with which the underpinnings of landscape urbanism have been absorbed right back into landscape architecture would tend to militate against the formation of a new discipline. Rather, it suggests that

landscape urbanism has simply emerged as a process of landscape architecture's evolutionary need to take its place as the context-based profession that provides the foundation for urban design.

What this means for the future of landscape architecture is uncertain, however. As the paradigm shifts towards landscape and context, so building architects are taking an ever-increasing interest in landscape. Without question, this is a positive development that will lead both to more careful, holistic design across the architectures and to an ever-improving universal understanding of landscape. As landscape urbanism will probably be absorbed back into landscape architecture, so the disparate architectures might be absorbed back into one architecture again – though this time far more horizontal than vertical in conception. A landscape architect of parochial disposition might have cause to fear this, but if landscape is the foundation of such a reorganisation, then we may be assured that the goals and values that the profession holds dear will be held aloft and its acts will belong to human posterity rather than institutional memory.

The rise of the urban designer

While the architectures may one day merge once more, for the time being the emergence of the job title 'urban designer' may already be doing harm to the Landscape Institute (LI), the Royal Institute of British Architects

(RIBA) and the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). It is now commonplace (and frustratingly vague) for professionals to refer to themselves as urban designers without stating their basic professional qualifications and chartership; indeed they may not have any qualifications at all. It is impossible to estimate how many would-be chartered architects, planners and landscape

What is an urban designer?

"A central debate in urban design is whether the term 'urban designer' has any real meaning. If there is such a discipline as urban design, then it follows that one who practises within the discipline should be called an urban designer. Indeed, there are a number of university programmes that prepare students for exactly this role. The problem, though, is in the vastness of the field. The question: 'But what do you do?' might still remain. It is necessary to identify within what area of the field one is a practitioner.

Further, there are no professional bodies that provide legal definitions, university accreditation, organised testing for qualifications, or insurance for urban design as a profession. For the time being, it is still necessary for an individual practitioner to qualify within one of the architectural or planning professions in order to provide the assurance of adequate legal and financial protection, and stringent professional and ethical standards. This professional standing can then be the ideal platform for specialisation in urban design."

“AS THE PARADIGM SHIFTS TOWARDS LANDSCAPE, SO BUILDING ARCHITECTS ARE TAKING AN EVER-INCREASING INTEREST IN LANDSCAPE”

architects have already opted out of the time and expense of chartership, based upon the knowledge that they can often do the same job at an equivalent wage if they call themselves an urban designer. While chartered membership of the Landscape Institute continues to grow, it is difficult to say how many prospective CMLIs have been lost to the nebulous ranks of 'urban designers'. How much more strength all the institutes could currently have in accreditation, chartership, policy creation, lobbying and networking is impossible to judge. I attempted to draw the line on the definition of 'urban designer' in a recent text co-written with Ed Wall: *Basics Landscape Architecture: Urban Design* (see left).

Attaining qualifications

There are currently a number of institutions across the UK that offer postgraduate degrees in urban design or landscape urbanism, though none of them has yet been brought into the LI's formal accreditation structure (although at present the LI does welcome applications for Licentiate membership from those who have completed an undergraduate award in landscape and an MA in urban design). The degrees offered are either at diploma or master's levels, though some universities also offer a certificate course.

It is certainly appropriate to offer Masters courses in urban design, but it is less clear whether there is benefit from earlier specialisation at Diploma level. L...



Below the High Line walkway, an undulating terrain of moss and groundcovers thrive in the shade

What value a certificate in urban design could provide either the individual or employer is dubious at best. A certificate might be useful in allowing a clearer understanding of urban design processes to people who are working in support or peripheral areas.

Qualifications in urban design should be accredited and lead to chartership in one of the three institutes primarily concerned with urban design (LI, RIBA, RTPI) – this is a crucial basic measure that would protect both private and public interests and safety. This will be difficult and unwieldy to implement, but it simply must be done. This process will require initial steps, some of which are

Next steps

Agreement must be reached between the RIBA, the RTPI and the LI, perhaps facilitated by an organisation such as the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment or the Urban Design Group, on the following frameworks:

- What basic knowledge is required of all practitioners in urban design in all professions
- What subject areas in urban design (and what quantity) should be delivered at undergraduate level to prepare students for postgraduate study
- What specific roles each of the professions involved in urban design fulfil and how postgraduate education prepares students for these roles
- Whether generic degrees in urban design are appropriate to all professions equally, or whether specialisations should occur, possibly leading to the abolition of generic degrees in urban design
- Whether accreditation should be provided by individual institutes or by a committee from across the institutes.

already under way or in discussion. The LI, for example, is considering the accreditation of urban design MAs when combined with an undergraduate degree in landscape architecture and is exploring possible structures for a graduate entry award.

Young practitioners in particular need to come to the fore in the discussions that are to come on these questions. Old models for education and its accreditation, chartership and routes to chartership, and collaborative working in professional practice all need to be reevaluated and restructured, perhaps with greater flexibility to accommodate a period of change. Old boundaries need to be redrawn, or perhaps simply erased in order to foster better communication, cooperation and trust across the architectures.

Practitioners must begin once more to see themselves not as beneficiaries of their respective institutes, but as members, as participants that have the right and responsibility to speak up for the future of their professions. The upcoming discussion about the role of urban design in built environment education and practice will require a measure of humility from the professions alongside a measure of confidence. We need some starry-eyed pragmatism to define a truly positive and powerful future for landscape architecture and urban design. •

Tim Waterman is a lecturer in landscape architecture at Writtle College.

Basics Landscape Architecture: Urban Design; Ed Wall & Tim Waterman; ISBN: 978 2 940411 12 2 (pbk).

The Fundamentals of Landscape Architecture; Tim Waterman, ISBN: 978-2940373918 (pbk).