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The Other Side of the Fence: What Drives Landscape

By Paul Bennett

Landscape design has gained new cachet in architecture circles. Until only about five years ago, many architects saw landscape design as window dressing, a finishing touch in the design process. Now, landscape architecture is becoming a new frontier, a discipline perhaps more fertile for developing new concepts than architecture: context trumps objects. Some architects are experimenting with landscape, such as Peter Eisenman, FAIA, with his proposal for the railyards on the West Side of Manhattan, and Iowa architect Bill Conway, AIA, with his designs for Interstate 80 rest areas. Landscape architects, meanwhile, have always known the rich conceptual depth of their profession. They're a little bothered that architects think they can cross the natural boundaries between the professions with ease, boundaries that exist for pragmatic reasons. There's a lot more to landscape architecture than planting design and circulation plans. In the same way that buildings fall down, not all landscapes work.

Architects' new interest in landscape architecture, however, is more than curious experimentation. Architecture is more collaborative today than ever before, and landscape architects have become prized members of design teams. Many architects realize that landscape can work in dialogue with buildings, helping to expand a narrative beyond what any building could accomplish alone. In other instances, landscape architects bring discrete technical knowledge and close attention to such issues as grading and ecology, which architects just don't learn in school. And in some cases, architects are learning that landscape architects, because of their experience with large scales and natural systems, are well equipped for synthesizing ideas and fusing concepts: they are consummate collaborators. Still, collaboration requires a certain degree of understanding. For architects to simply work with landscape architects—never mind dabbling in their realm—they need to grasp the larger issues that have transformed landscape design in the last five years.

The greening of landscape architecture

The single most transformative issue in landscape has been the influence of ecological science. Environmental issues are now in the mainstream, which means that landscape architects need to do far more than make places pretty. Woefully slow to absorb the environ-

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mental revolution of the 1970s, landscape architecture finally woke up to it in the 1980s, and by the early 1990s a handful of firms were specializing in ecological design. At the turn of the millennium, environmentalism is no longer a matter of specialization. Today, it is difficult to find a landscape architect who isn't thinking about ecology in some way.

Sacred grounds

For many years the leader in ecological design has been Philadelphia-based Andropogon Associates. Although sometimes criticized for a lingering romanticism, Andropogon rose to the top of the ecological game by combining good science with strong design. It has carved a niche in the field of ecological restoration—that is, the practice of redesigning spaces so that they conform better to natural processes and systems. In this realm, the firm's redesign of Frederick Law Olmsted's tripartite Louisville park system is exemplary. Here, it recast the classic 19th-century picturesque idiom in an ecological mold. Large open spaces of grass, called *greenswards*, were redesigned as wild grassy meadows, thus reducing runoff and reliance on fertilizers and herbicides. In the woodland areas, the firm reengineered the paths to create large swales to capture water. Andropogon also instituted a reforestation program for the edges of the woodland areas to mimic natural succession, which entails open meadows giving way to small shrubs, giving way to mature canopies. Now, the park is not only a place for recreation, but it is also an ecological entity, a refuge for nature as much as for people. More than a facelift, this work was a reconception.

Ecology has even infiltrated the starkly minimalist work of Berkeley-based Peter Walker and Partners (PWP). Part of this shift is due to environmental regulations, says partner Tom Leader: "You can't do anything that doesn't help repair the environment these days." But without "knee-jerk naturalism," PWP approaches ecology as a design component rather than the sole parti. The result is an intriguing mix of natural and geometric forms. At the new Boeing commercial airline headquarters in Renton, Wash., on the site of an old racetrack, PWP confronted the discovery of a wetland after work had begun on the SOM-designed buildings. PWP accentuated the dendritic form of the wetland by extending the ribbons of wetland through the center of the site and reintroducing a natural flow of water. Over this, they laid an enormous grid of trees oriented toward Mount Rainer, views of which

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FEATURES



OSLUND.AND.ASSOC.

Landscape architects tend to mature within the shelter of a firm, emerging only in midcareer to make a name for themselves. Tom Oslund recently left the confines of HGA to start Minneapolis-based oslund.and.assoc., an eight-person firm taking on commissions from planning to design, from large corporate campuses to art gallery installations.

Oslund was the master planner on new corporate campuses for the Good Samaritan organization in Sioux Falls, S.Dak., and for the Medtronic corporation in Fridley, Minn. On each project, Oslund translated the client's program into a large-scale landscape

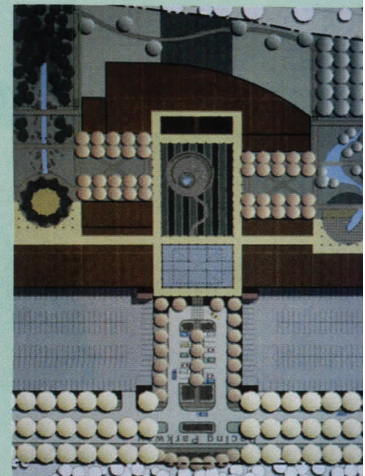
plan. For instance, at the Good Samaritan campus, Oslund sited the chapel (yet to be commissioned) as the entrance marker for the complex and then revolved the rest of the architecture around a central lake, which has a kind of equalizing effect on the overall layout. The conference center, designed by Julie Snow, FAIA, was the first completed structure.

At Medtronic Headquarters, Oslund used architecture to create a series of interlocking, interior landscapes. What might have been leftover pieces become essential corridors and visual linkages.

"We develop philosophical approaches to the structures," says

Oslund, "and look at them in terms of the way they meet the ground and the way they fit into the overall site. [In a campus context] buildings tend to be inspired or grow out of the site rather than out of a derivative style that is flashed around in the latest magazines."

The Good Samaritan Society's headquarters in South Dakota (above) and Medtronic's headquarters in Minnesota (right).



Ian McHarg rocked landscape architecture in 1969 when he published *Design with Nature*, his clarion call for ecological planning. It galvanized the profession, but perhaps none felt it so strongly as McHarg's students at the University of Pennsylvania. Among them were two couples, Rolf and Leslie Sauer and Colin and Carol Franklin, who were to found Andropogon, now a 32-person firm based in Philadelphia. The firm has carved a niche for itself in ecological restoration.

At a new spa resort in Japan, adjacent to a national park, Andropogon worked with Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates to

reduce the impact of the resort's buildings and paths on the surroundings. Andropogon did a large amount of the design work on-site, including the design of a cantilevered bridge built into the side of a densely forested mountain, a means of "immersing" visitors in the experience of nature. The firm also persuaded the local landscape architect to remove and save 3,000 trees, which took nine months. "This is an oak chestnut forest with an understory of azalea and cherry," says Carol Franklin. "It's to die for. You cannot buy this in a nursery." It was a needling point perhaps, with big ramifications. "Venturi got the bug and developed the idea of 'the village in

the forest' for the architecture. It was a real dialogue."

In another project demonstrating the widening expertise of landscape architects, Andropogon recently created a visitors' master plan for Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, where rampant tourism has seriously degraded both grounds and building. The firm will restore the pilgrimage approach to the building, accentuating the woodland context and hiding the support facilities, such as maintenance sheds and parking lots. The plan ventured so far afield from traditional landscape issues as to suggest the number of visitors that should be allowed at one time.

A romantic sensibility is mistak-

enly ascribed to Andropogon. In truth, the firm wrestles with Postmodern complexities. "We can mathematically describe a tree," says Carol Franklin, "but not with Euclidean geometry. The great tragedy is that the designers have very infrequently tapped the scientific knowledge of our age, such as the science of ecology and fractal geometry. [We are attempting] designs that are about the real geometries of nature."

The diversity of Andropogon's work at Nikko Kirifuri Resort in Japan emerges in a waterfall and pool (below), terrace steps (below left), and a bridge over restored foliage (top left), co-designed with VSBA.

ANDROPOGON ASSOCIATES





HARGREAVES ASSOCIATES

The 1990s were good to George Hargreaves. He entered the decade as the profession's enfant terrible, cranking out surprisingly original work while under the tutelage of his mentor Peter Walker, and he left it as landscape architecture's undeniable leader. Big news in the industry has been his capture of several large-scale commissions that would traditionally have gone to architects. They include the redevelopment of Louisville's waterfront and master plans for the University of Cincinnati and the Olympic Village in Sydney.

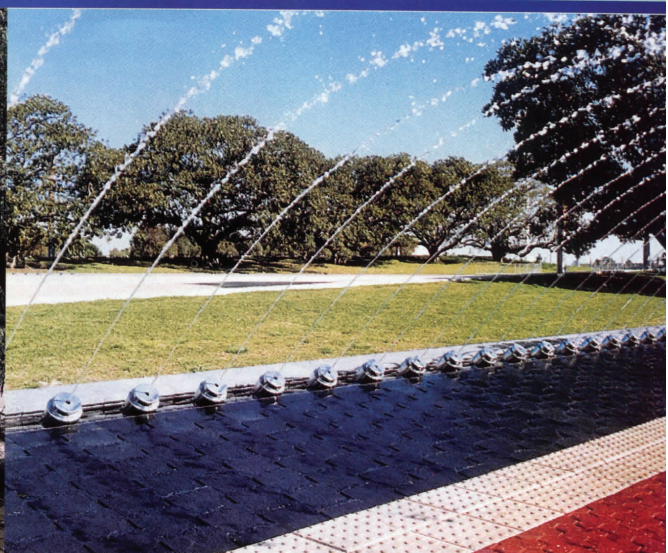
Sydney Games organizers called Hargreaves when design development for the Olympic Village hit trouble. Supposedly, so little communication existed between the architects of individual parcels that no one accounted for a five-foot grade change in the middle of the site. Hargreaves established a working design committee and produced a comprehensive plan for the site that unifies the architectural components around a central plaza. The plan also introduces ecological interventions to the site, including green corridors and a series of four-

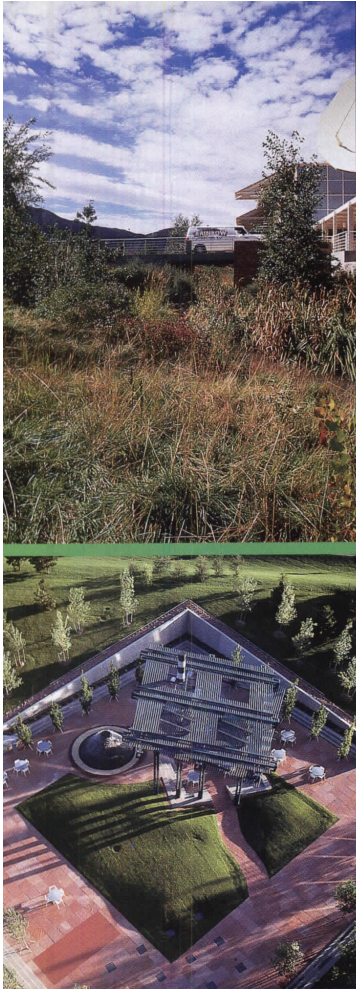
tains that purify water from a nearby polluted stream.

In recent years, the San Francisco- and Cambridge, Mass.-based firm has focused on making natural processes accessible. Along the Guadalupe River in San Jose, Calif., Hargreaves combined an engineered channel bed with a wetland to create a natural, ecologically inspired design. The firm developed the underlay with the Army Corps of Engineers and consulting biologists, ecologists, and engineers, replacing the traditional U-shaped concrete riverbed with a system of stone terraces,

gabions, and vegetated slopes. The design introduces biological diversity into the river system to help slow flows and clean water. It also creates an infrastructure of interlocking stairways that provide unfettered access to the river.

The grounds of the Aronoff Center for Design and Art (top left) and Sigma Sigma Commons (top right) at the University of Cincinnati, Guadalupe River Park in San Jose, Calif. (bottom left), and Sydney's Olympic Village (bottom right).





CIVITAS

"Our society presumes that knowledge is power. I don't believe that's true. I believe judgment is power," says Mark Johnson, principal of Denver-based Civitas and a long-time agitator for the landscape architecture profession. According to Johnson, landscape architects are schooled in the art of making judgments.

This credo drives Civitas' versatility. The landscaped plazas the firm designed for Great-West Life's U.S. headquarters in suburban Denver reflect the angular geometry of the company's building and the buildings of the surrounding office park. For the University of Colorado's

Laboratory for Space Physics in Boulder, the firm chose nearly the opposite approach, restoring native grasses that grew up right next to the buildings. For MCI's western headquarters in the foothills of Colorado Springs, Civitas took the middle road, weaving grass between sandstone pavers at the site's edges to create a transition zone between buildings and their natural surroundings.

Civitas works primarily in landscape design, about half for public agencies and half for the private sector. With the help of architects and planners on staff, the firm has also made extensive forays into the realms

of master planning, urban design, and architecture, including the recent commission to replan the National Renewable Energy Laboratory. The laboratory, which is the federal government's largest alternative energy test site, has expanded haphazardly over the years without regard to site characteristics, most notably the problem of extreme runoff velocity from a nearby mesa. Civitas, inspired by an unrealized 1970s design by architecture firm CRS, manages the water flow by siting long, linear buildings parallel to runoff patterns. Civitas didn't design the buildings, but did determine their footprints.

This page: The Laboratory for Space Physics at the University of Boulder (top left); Great-West Life U.S. headquarters in suburban Denver (bottom left); and MCI western headquarters in Colorado Springs (above).





Water Pollution Control Laboratory in Portland, Ore., landscape design by Murase Associates.

dominate the site. The contrast between the strikingly man-made and the seemingly natural stirred some controversy, but also heightened awareness of previously hidden ecology.

If society has become estranged from nature, landscape architecture is responding by revealing underlying processes. Robert Murase Associates in Portland, Ore., has taken this practice of “day-lighting” to new levels of artistry. At the Water Quality Laboratory in Portland, Murase captured storm runoff in an intricately designed “bioswale.” The water passes through a steel trough planted with wetland species that clarify and clean the water of pollutants. The system successfully recaptures and purifies runoff, usually trundled off-site by a mundane network of underground pipes.

The influence of ecology in the profession has prompted most larger landscape firms to hire ecologists, which in turn readies firms for different types of commissions. In the ecological realm, San Francisco-based EDAW, the country’s largest landscape architecture firm, and JJR, based in Ann Arbor, Mich., are leading the way with large-scale environmental planning and remediation projects. JJR’s design for Crosswinds Marsh, a constructed 1,000-acre wetland that mitigates the impact of an expansion at Detroit Metropolitan Airport, was awarded the profession’s highest award this year.

From the particular to the general

Another big idea currently afoot is of landscape architecture as a very general design discipline. Many landscape architects think that instead of focusing on specific technical problems (like ecology), their profession should consider the interrelationships of every element in a system. For instance, they should not only relate buildings to each other, but they should also stimulate interaction among the people using a site. This kind of thinking has prepared landscape architects to meet the newest expectations for academic environments and workplaces: progressive administrators and managers of college and corporate campuses strive for “total environments” where learning and productivity can be heightened through the manipulation of the user’s experience.

Carol Mayer Reed’s design for the new Nike headquarters in Portland, Ore., represents a new breed of corporate campuses. In addition to pleasant courtyards for sitting, employees can now enjoy an extensive running track, soccer fields, and nature walks along a stream.

At university campuses, the changes have been more complex. One major challenge today is to knit together campuses that have been fragmented by haphazard building. The University of Cincinnati commissioned San Francisco- and Cambridge, Mass.-based Hargreaves Associates to create a campus master plan in 1991. The initial work evolved into extensive urban design, until ultimately, the firm reviewed architectural proposals, giving advice on the best architects to hire for each project.

The problem with the University of Cincinnati campus, says George Hargreaves, was that piecemeal planning had destroyed the sense of place. What the landscape architect provided was an overarching strategy for the entire campus, connecting fragmented zones by rethinking the space between them—the landscape. As a result, the new buildings at Cincinnati, currently being designed by a “who’s who” of architecture, including Frank Gehry, Morphosis, Pei Cobb Freed, Peter Eisenman, and Gwathmey Siegel, respond first to the spatial fabric of the campus and second to their own programmatic or technical needs.

The idea of the landscape architect as a consummate generalist can be dangerous, potentially weakening the public perception of landscape architecture. Danger aside, on the ground we’re seeing the idea take hold and redefine the profession in entirely new ways. Denver-based Civitas has used landscape architecture to infuse solid design ideas into planning. The firm was brought on early to work on the reuse plan for Denver’s abandoned Stapleton International Airport. Civitas’ ideas were so well thought out that it has stayed on to shepherd the project through the next phase: negotiating with the developer on behalf of the city.

Collaboration: More strain than synthesis

Another major theme in landscape architecture today is collaboration. In some ways, the ecological revolution and broader conceptual horizons have driven the profession in this direction—some would say it is impossible to create a landscape without working with a host of other professionals, including ecologists, engineers, artists, and architects. Collaboration requires more, however, than just working together. It requires breaking down the hierarchy of prime- and sub-consultants and creating an equitable team to which each professional contributes. *(continued on page 194)*



BIG IDEAS LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

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Not everyone, however, thinks this partnering can happen smoothly. According to Bill Callaway, president of SWA, a Sausalito, Calif.-based landscape architecture firm, the state of collaboration between architecture and landscape architecture is worse than it has ever been. He gives a couple of reasons, including the development of a hero-architect paradigm that encourages big-name architects to believe they can complete a project entirely on their own. But the main reason for poor collaboration, says Callaway, is a lack of cross education between disciplines. Landscape architects learn nothing in school about architecture, and architects learn nothing about landscape. The problem has obvious technical ramifications. Architects have few skills in grading and topography; landscape architects fail to grasp aesthetics or philosophies of building types. An even bigger problem is how this lack of intellectual reciprocity affects the relationship between the two professions: they look down on one another.

Callaway would like to see both professions more broadly educated in each other's disciplines with a real effort to bridge the divide. Some academics have proposed the idea that, in the future, there will be no division; architecture will absorb landscape, or vice versa, and we'll be left with a profession of "placemakers." It's a fabulous, if seemingly unrealistic notion, but we can get an idea of how collaborations with architects might come about by looking at the collaborative work of landscape architects and artists.

With the old mindset, artists produced objects that landscape architects then "sited" in their designs. The new mindset has artists and landscape architects creating places that are at once designed landscapes and pieces of art. Some examples include Michael van Valkenburgh's collaboration with Ann Hamilton on a new riverfront park in Pittsburgh; the work of Ignacio Bunster-Ossa, principal of the multidisciplinary firm Wallace Roberts and Todd, with artist Jodi Pinto; and Paul Friedberg's work with Jackie Ferrara. Pinto describes her work with Bunster-Ossa, on a redesign of the coastal frontage of Santa Monica, Calif., as a tempering dance, a "kind of weave, in which you can't pull the thread from any part of the design without destroying it." Paul Friedberg says the artist acts as a foil to the designer. "Artists deal with ambiguity and paradox," says Friedberg, "whereas landscape architects and architects deal with

total resolution. We had two views: one that said things are complete, and one that said they're not."

The issue that concerns Friedberg most is whether landscape architects—and any architects for that matter—have the right value system for collaborating. For these professions to evolve, they need to shed some of the Modernist baggage that holds them back, including the idea of designer as sole genius, in favor of the broader concept of generalist, cross-disciplinary explorer.

Indeed, a casual survey of young talent in the profession seems to indicate a trend toward crossing previously impenetrable boundaries. A good example is Cliff Garten, a potter, whose work gradually became larger and more spatially oriented until the next logical step was landscape. He received his MLA from Harvard and is now working in SWA's Laguna Beach, Calif., office. Garten designed a well-regarded art park in St. Paul, as well as the interior landscape of the new Memorial Sloan-Kettering Medical Center in New York City. Another artist-turned-landscape-architect to watch is Mikyoung Kim. Like Garten, she was educated as a sculptor and brings that sensibility to landscape. Among her first commissions are two courtyard gardens in Seoul that transform the minimalist idiom with an eye toward landscape's experiential quality.

To each his own

While many landscape architects welcome increased interest in their profession, some observers warn against excessive emphasis on cross-disciplinary projects. The evolutionary pressures on landscape architecture in the last five years have made it an extremely complex profession, one that is not easily understood from the outside. Hargreaves, for one, recognizes that while there are times for true collaboration, the more appropriate model is cooperation, in which architects do their thing and landscape architects do theirs. And from this division, he says, a "natural gravity" will determine who leads and who follows.

"Clearly, architects look over the fence, see a rebirth in our profession, and see larger processes in what is called placemaking," says Hargreaves. "But they will never be able to come to grips with that because architecture is always formal. Landscape architecture resists a formal solution."

Whether in cooperation or complete collaboration, it's time to introduce more flexibility to the dialogue between the professions. ■