



Students in the Wilderness

The relationship between wilderness and design and the landscape architect's role in that environment, was the underpinning theme of a field trip to Stewart Island involving Lincoln students and staff.



Main picture: Swing bridge to Maori Beach, Stewart Island. Photograph by Mary Hallet.

Above: Mutton bird scrub (*Senecio reinoldii*) endemic south of 44°. This type of scrub is typical of the coastal vegetation of exposed areas of the southern islands. It is rugged, tough and bent by the forces of nature, forming a challenging environment to design within. Photograph by Neil Challenger.

One of the Lincoln University BLA programme's requirements is for students to participate in at least one field trip during their course of study. These field trips are of value both as an educational and social experience. Last April, 40 students – including undergraduate, graduate and masters students – spent four days camping at Port William on the eastern coast of Stewart Island, exploring the idea of wilderness. Through attentive observation, by using sketching, visual and verbal note-taking, the students immersed themselves in the landscape, capturing ephemeral qualities in their notebooks to experience and study the wilderness landscape.

During the four days, they also engaged in philosophical discussions and debates, trying to come to grips with the concept of “wilderness” and the effect that landscape architecture ought to have on wilderness. Various interpretations of the meaning of wilderness were suggested. Bret McLennan proposed that the concept is a cultural construct and that we as humans have a metaphoric “bubble” surrounding us within which we feel comfortable and not threatened. The scale of this “bubble” and the extent to which we feel safe will define the various

gradations of wilderness. Extending that concept, Becs Ramsay expressed her view that the idea of wilderness reflects the degree of familiarity we have with a certain environment.

Others felt that the preservation of wild, virgin or “untouched” nature in the landscape is important for spiritual reasons and as landscape architects we are challenged by an inherent contradiction, the “paradox of conservation” (Seddon, 1997) in which we manage wilderness areas to protect them from human intervention, by human intervention. By definition, the activity of design requires an intention to improve, to alter and control the landscape, thus there is a danger that the landscape will lose its wilderness quality. Yet, it is acknowledged today that it is the “cultural value invested in natural places through their physical developments as parks [that] best assures the preservation of those places in a relatively natural state” (Carr, 1998 p9).

The students had an opportunity to crystallise their thinking and try to apply it to a design context with a one-day design charette on site, presenting a provocative hypothetical scenario of a proposal to build a Club-Med tourist resort on Stewart Island. In design teams that represented divergent interest groups, the students enthusiastically generated conceptual plans for such a development. The various clients for whom the teams were designing for, ranged from the New Zealand Board of Tourism, DoC, Club Med International, Stewart Island residents, the Rakiura Maori runaka and Greenpeace. This enabled a range of ideological

perspectives to be expressed in physical form.

The educational objective for this encounter was to free the students from the constraints of the drawing board environment and allow them to fully experience the landscape emotionally as well as physically and intellectually. The outcome of the one-day charette was a rich array of creative proposals. One group proposed submarine accommodation so that the actual landscape would appear pristine and untouched, while another project challenged the whole idea of "pure nature", and the way in which we are expected to deal with it, by proposing an underwater aquarium, casino and an aquatic museum to be the main attraction and focus of development. A more solid approach was taken by a group which proposed a "Golden Path" to "provide a balance between recreational activities and nature". Their Golden Path was expressed via "a link that shows the transition from comfortable to rugged accommodation to provide a range of wilderness experiences".

This unique opportunity to fully experience a place and to produce the conceptual framework on site was very much appreciated by the students. As expressed by Wah Tze Chet, one of the students, who was impressed by the high quality of the work and thought this was due to the fact that "...we could feel, smell, see and live in the surroundings".

As educators, we believe that this powerful emotional and social experience

is critical for developing a passion for the profession of landscape architecture. We hope we are planting these seedlings of commitment to the landscape today, so that they grow and mature as years go past. We would like to believe that these future professionals will forever carry within a positive memory of their personal wilderness experience and thus design appropriately. ■■

Article written by Shelley Egoz.

REFERENCES:

- Carr Ethan, 1998, *Wilderness by Design*, Lincoln, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press.
Seddon George, 1997, *Landprints*, UK, Cambridge University Press.
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Top: Students' design team presentation of concepts – left to right Ed Dacre, Helen Haigh, David Chilton, Annette Garrett and Lyn Bishop. Photograph by Shelley Egoz.

Above: Students' design team work in progress - left to right: Fraser Miller, Blair Haney, Tessa Bunny, Ben Espie and Georgie Pinckney. Photograph by Shelly Egoz.