

# Towards a Politically Avant-Gardist Criticism in Landscape Architecture

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# Abstract

This thesis proposes the development of a politically avant-gardist criticism of landscape architecture as a starting point to a politically avant-gardist practice of landscape architecture. The thesis examines major texts on the avant-garde from the fine arts. Two distinct meanings of avant-garde are traced. The first indicates an artist or artwork that calls attention to particular political structures and works for change. The second refers to an artist or artwork that is “new in its field”. The judgment of newness is often based on stylistic issues. There is no current critical approach based on a political avant-garde in landscape architectural discourse. In landscape architecture, avant-garde is most often used as a stylistic label, meaning “new in the field”. When it is used in critical or theoretical work, the political issues surrounding projects or ideas are not addressed or are referred to in broad terms. A case study reveals that important information is lost when this definition of avant-garde is employed. A second case study reveals that a political approach to criticism of public space exists in the fine arts and that this approach can shed light on a potential approach within landscape architecture. The proposed critical methodology is outlined and tested in a final case study that examines one particular urban space. This case study reveals a set of complex political issues related to the design and management of public space.

## Preface

This thesis developed out of an interest in the relationships and contradictions that exists amongst landscape architecture, fine art, and politics. Early studies explored the ways in which English landscape architects Gertrude Jekyll and Geoffrey Jellicoe were inspired by the fine arts.

Gertrude Jekyll's uniqueness as a designer has been credited to her early training as a painter and craftswoman in the arts and crafts style. At the Kensington School in London where she studied painting, Jekyll was exposed to the ideas of John Ruskin and William Morris, two of the founders of the Arts and Crafts movement in England. Jekyll applied her training in color theory and her experience in interior design, jewelry making, wood carving, and many other crafts to her later work as a garden designer. She fortuitously brought the arts and crafts methods relating to the unity of all the decorative arts and an intimate knowledge of one's own craft to bear on landscape design.

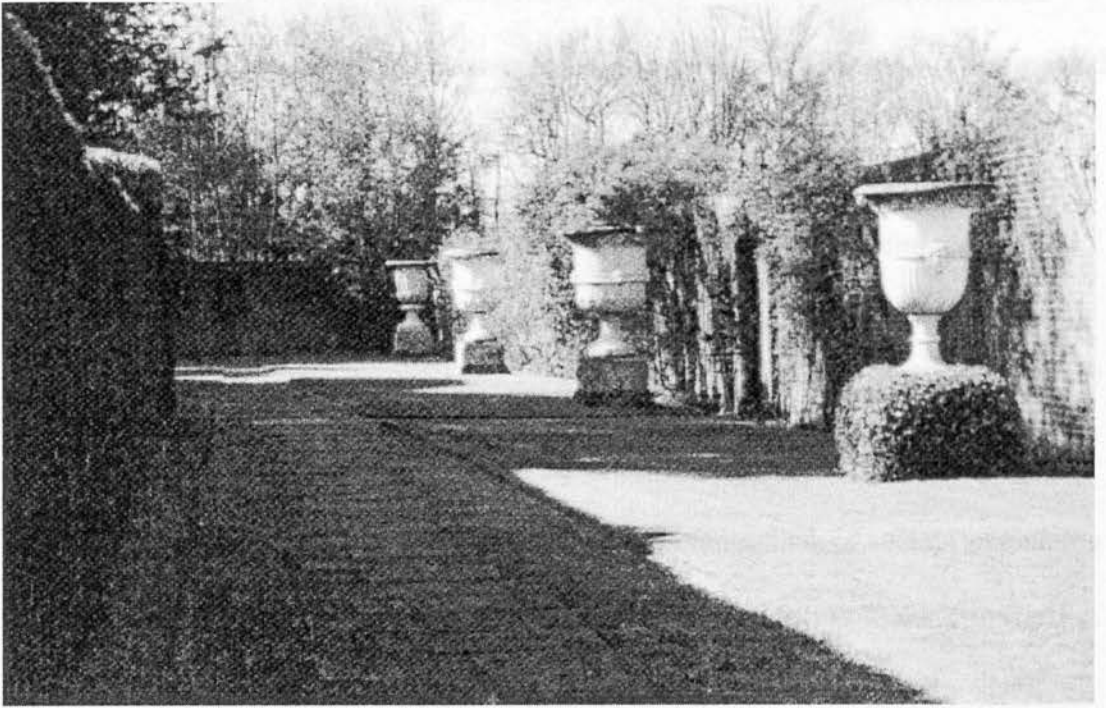
A later study on the work of Geoffrey Jellicoe sought to understand the way in which he drew ideas from modern art and translated them into built landscapes. The investigation combined on-site analysis of three historic Jellicoe projects and an examination of the work of the abstract artists who inspired them. The "Magritte Walk" at Sutton Place in Surrey, named after the painter René Magritte, is an attempt to create a Surrealist juxtaposition in the landscape. The urns lining the sides of the Magritte Walk would have drawn little attention in a smaller size or in a more expansive setting. But the location of these "mammoth" vases (more than two meters tall) along the sides of a confined walk, opposite a dark yew wall, creates sensations



**Figure 1.** Gertrude Jekyll's Dutch Garden at Hestercombe House, England.

*Kristine Miller, 1997.*





**Figure 2.** Magritte Walk, Geoffrey Jellicoe at Sutton Place, England, 1980.

*Kristine Miller, 1997.*

in the visitor of surprise, curiosity and perhaps unease. Jellicoe also experimented with ideas and subsequent physical designs regarding modern conceptions of time and speed and constructing unconscious allegories in the landscape.

Shortly after completing these two studies I took part in a seminar in the government department at Cornell University. In this seminar Susan Buck-Morss assembled a set of readings on politics and time. Buck-Morss discussed the avant-garde as an art form that sought to “shock us out of moral complacency and political resignation, and that it take us to task for the overwhelming lack of social imagination which characterizes so much of cultural production in all its forms.”<sup>1</sup> We discussed the work of Henri Bergson, David Harvey, Guy DeBord, Walter Benjamin, and Donald Egbert in an attempt to set out some of the relationships among culture, politics and economics. A section of thesis was developed during this course. It examines the way in which avant-garde is used in an article by landscape architectural historian Elizabeth Meyers on Parc des Buttes Chaumont.<sup>2</sup> It argues that a different critical definition of avant-garde than the one employed by Meyers would have illuminated the complex relationships between form and politics in Aphand’s design. Interestingly, I had read the same article by Elizabeth Meyer as a graduate student in landscape architecture but was unaware that Meyer’s reading of Parc des Buttes Chaumont left out any important information on the history of Paris. Writing this paper was a first glimpse of how a political discourse within landscape architecture could build a set of questions to inform practice.

This new understanding of politics in landscape architecture brought new questions to light about the Jekyll and Jellicoe studies. Jekyll may have mastered an attention to materials and craft, but she ignored the political objectives of the Morris and Ruskin. The Arts and Crafts Movement spread as a reaction to the loss of quality

and destruction of vernacular architecture, and worker alienation of the industrial revolution. There is no indication that Jekyll's writing or design work carried forward or even discussed these economic and political goals. Jekyll designed residential gardens for many wealthy clients who benefited from the modes of production that Ruskin and Morris criticized. While the style of a Jekyll garden reflected the attention to materials and employment of traditional methods characteristic of the arts and crafts style, the gardens in no way conveyed the political ethos of the movement.

Jellicoe's attempt at translations of Surrealist techniques also seemed to fall short with respect to the original works. At Sutton Place, Jellicoe may have succeeded in creating a space that has a similar bizarre quality to Magritte's paintings but the translation from art to landscape stops there. The goals of the Surrealists to shock the viewer into a new interpretation of art and life are lacking. There is nothing in Jellicoe's writing to suggest an interest in this both critical and *crucial* aspect of modern art. Just as Jekyll had no ability or interest in exploring the political nature of the Arts and Crafts Movement in her work, Jellicoe made little attempt to explore the politics of the Surrealists in a way that would challenge the practice of landscape architecture.

Landscape architecture involves issues including aesthetics, economics, physical planning, community design, and the development of public space. Readings in Buck-Morss' course indicated that while landscape architects may not discuss the political implications of their work, these discussions are happening in other fields such as geography, cultural studies and history. There is great potential for creating a material and discursive practice in landscape architecture that addresses significant social and political issues like gentrification, homelessness, and the commercialization of public space.



What I am proposing in this thesis is an expansion of what we consider to be the boundaries of landscape architecture. I argue that a critical avant-garde *within* the discipline would be able to set these new boundaries through social and political interrogation of history and present practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2000), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth K. Meyer, "The Public Park as Avant-Garde (Landscape) Architecture: A Comparative Interpretation of Two Parisian Parks, Parc de la Villette (1983-1990) and Parc des Buttes-Chaumont (1864-1867)," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 16-26.

# Introduction

This thesis proposes a politically avant-gardist criticism for landscape architecture. While landscape architects, from Olmsted to the present, state that they would like their work to have a positive social impact, the discipline lacks a tradition of published political discourse. Since theory forms the basis for action, critical tools must be developed to understand how the design of such places as parks, plazas, urban centres, and housing developments affect society. This is particularly true in the realm of public space. Scholars from other fields, such as political, social, and cultural theory, have written about the impact of politics on public space planning, development and management. But this dialog is infrequent within landscape architecture.

This thesis presents a background and methodology for a new approach to criticism within landscape architecture. The approach is based on the work of political/cultural theorists Walter Benjamin and Susan Buck-Morss. During a seminar taught by Buck-Morss at Cornell University, she proposed the idea of a future for the avant-garde. This future was based on a definition of the avant-garde very different from those commonly used. While most often the term avant-garde is used to describe a work that challenges its particular field, Buck-Morss emphasized a different definition. This definition of avant-garde describes an artistic or critical work that draws attention to the political structures imbedded in cultural forms like public spaces, products, images, etc. This avant-garde, according to Buck-Morss, has the ability to draw our attention to social issues of the present, and to help us develop alternatives.

There were several challenges in the development of this thesis. First, since landscape architecture lacks a strong theoretical basis<sup>a</sup>, an exploration of the

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<sup>a</sup> This point, that landscape architecture, as compared to architecture or the fine arts, lacks a strong theoretical or critical basis has been raised by a number of writers. In particular, see James Corner, "Discourse on Theory II," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 2 (1991): 116. For a discussion on the need for

development of the term avant-garde had to begin outside of the field. “Avant-garde”, like “modernism” and “phenomenological”, is a term borrowed from fields such as the fine arts and philosophy. The thesis begins by asking how avant-garde developed as a critical term, examining theoretical works by art and cultural historians. Next, it had to be determined whether or not a politically avant-gardist criticism already existed in landscape architecture. Finally, the thesis needed to develop and “test out” an approach to a politically avant-gardist landscape architectural criticism and in doing so, decide if avant-garde, as a critical term, was necessary to such an approach.

Chapter 1 provides an examination of how the term avant-garde developed. Most sources pointed to the existence of a political definition of the avant-garde. This political definition was said to have preceded the more commonly used definition of avant-garde that describes an artwork or artist that challenges a particular artistic field. There were, however, differences in interpretations regarding the timing of the movement, and the way in which the avant-garde operates within its field, and within the larger society. Some writers were pessimistic about the future of the avant-garde, stating that it had become part of the culture it originally challenged. Others believed that the avant-garde’s ability to draw attention to social issues could be revived.

Chapter 2 explores whether or not avant-garde is used as a politically critical tool in landscape architecture. Discussions in English language sources on the avant-garde and landscape architecture have happened almost exclusively in the United States. For example, only one article on the landscape architecture and the avant-garde was published in Australia, one in Canada, and none in Britain. The chapter includes a summary and critique of articles that appeared in a special issue of *Landscape Journal* titled: “The avant-garde and the landscape: can they be reconciled?” Of each article it is asked: What kind of working definition of avant-garde did each author employ? Did the article use avant-garde as a critical term related to politics, or was a more conventional stylistic definition used? While the

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critical thinking and critical inquiry see Margaret McAvin, ed, “Landscape Architecture and Critical Inquiry,” *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 2 (1991): 155-172.

*Landscape Journal* articles provide a view of how avant-garde may be used by theorists as a critical tool, the term avant-garde is also used in landscape architecture as a stylistic label. A special issue of *Landscape Architecture Magazine* featured “avant-gardeners”. The articles from this special issue were examined to understand the criteria the projects or designers were judged against to warrant the avant-gardist label. It was asked if this label was related to the aesthetic art-for-art’s sake avant-garde, or to a political definition. In most cases it was clear that the writer or designer was applying the label avant-garde to indicate a design style with no reference to social or political issues. However, other works were more complex and/or unclear. Some of these works provide points of entry for discussion about how art can and cannot impact political life.

Chapter 3 offers two very different case studies. The first examines, in greater depth, an article from the special issue of *Landscape Journal*. This article employs a particular definition of avant-garde in its judgment of two public parks. The definition employed judges the project not on how it related to politically in its social context, but on how it stylistically related to other works of landscape architecture. The case study seeks to understand what information is gained and what information is lost through this definition of avant-garde, as opposed to a political definition of avant-garde. The second case study examines an article written by a political theorist that does not use the term avant-garde at all. It does, however, offer an example of the relationships between politics and public space. This case study furthers discussion regarding what information a political analysis of landscape architectural projects might yield and why a discussion of politics is important in landscape architecture.

The first section of Chapter 4 sets out criteria for a politically avant-gardist criticism of landscape architecture. The proposed critical structure is based on the idea of historical materialism employed in cultural theory. The second section of the chapter tests-out the proposed methodology in a final case study. The case study examines a particular set of urban projects. This case study raises questions regarding

how design allows for the inclusion and exclusion of individuals and groups from public urban spaces. After a brief summary, a set of questions that were raised by the thesis proposal is discussed. Some of the questions addressed include: What areas for discussion are opened by this approach to landscape architectural criticism? What kinds of specific issues regarding urban public space can be addressed? What are the particular challenges of employing this kind of critical approach?

The first section of Chapter 5 summarises the thesis. The second section presents conclusions for the thesis and discusses areas for further investigation.



## CHAPTER 1: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TERM AVANT-GARDE

The goal of this chapter is to examine the development of avant-garde as a critical term. Donald D. Egbert's article, "The Idea of 'Avant-garde' in Art and Politics (1967)"<sup>1</sup> introduces the question of how the avant-garde is defined, especially as it relates to politics. This article was considered by Susan Buck-Morss to be the clearest summary of the development of the term avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> Egbert was a professor of art and archaeology at Princeton University who was also associated with the schools of architecture and American civilization. In addition to this article on art and politics within the avant-garde, Egbert wrote several articles on how social radicalism has affected the arts. In 1952, Egbert co-edited and co-authored *Socialism and American Life* (Princeton, NJ, 1952).

Renato Poggioli's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1968)<sup>3</sup> was the first book to trace the development of the term avant-garde within writing. Poggioli's work is considered unique in the study of the avant-garde because it discusses the ways in which the avant-garde functions relative to society and to the institution of art. Along with Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*,<sup>4</sup> Poggioli's book is the most cited source in the special issue of *Landscape Journal* on the avant-garde. Of the articles that contained bibliographies, over half cited one or both of these works.<sup>5</sup>

Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974, trans.1984) and the book's forward by Jochen Schulte-Sasse question the way in which Poggioli maps out the evolution of the term avant-garde. Bürger gives special consideration to the way in which avant-garde works relate to political issues. While Poggioli deals almost exclusively with the avant-garde in writing, Bürger considers the avant-garde in other forms including painting.

Guy Debord, founding member of the avant-garde Situationists International, outlines a particular role for the avant-garde in society that provides complex points for comparison with those of Egbert, Poggioli and Bürger. In *Society of the Spectacle*, originally published in 1967, Debord mapped out a particular set of goals for the avant-garde beyond the confines of categories like art and theory. Debord saw the role of the avant-garde as nothing less than the complete dismantling of capitalist society and set his work against that of previous avant-gardes including the Surrealists and Dadaists.

Susan Buck-Morss' *The Dialectics of Seeing* examines the work of Walter Benjamin, in particular "Passagen-Werk," also called the Arcades project.<sup>5</sup> Benjamin began the Arcades project in 1927 and the project was incomplete in 1940 when Benjamin committed suicide fleeing Nazi occupied France<sup>6</sup>. Buck-Morss situates the arcades project against the political structures that Benjamin sought to challenge with this critical work. While Egbert, Poggioli, Schulte-Sasse, and Bürger each in some way point to the downturn of the avant-garde and do not propose a possible future, Buck-Morss and Debord emphasize the importance of the avant-garde, especially as it relates to politics. Debord and Benjamin shared an interest in critical practice that draws attention to political inequities and offers alternatives. Buck-Morss sets out ideas on how the avant-garde could be reactivated as a critical practice today.

### **Donald D. Egbert, "The Idea of 'Avant-garde' in Art and Politics"**

Donald D. Egbert in his article, "The Idea of 'Avant-Garde' in Art and Politics" traced two definitions of avant-garde, one relating to art-for-art's sake and another relating to art which promotes a specific political system. Egbert describes artists of the art-for-art's sake avant-garde as deliberately setting their work apart from any political system or ideology to maintain the autonomy of art itself. They sought to challenge not political assumptions, but artistic assumptions. Abstraction was a crucial

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<sup>5</sup> This work is now available in translation. See *The Arcades Project*, trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999).

part of their aesthetic to show their break from pure representation. Realism was seen as restrictive and false.

Egbert sets the art-for-art's-sake mode of the avant-garde against a conception of the avant-garde art as a tool for promoting and sustaining political systems. Since this work needed to be easily 'read' by the masses in order to get the message across, realism was a crucial part of the aesthetic. Egbert traces these two disparate meanings - one all about art and the other all about politics - to Saint-Simon's<sup>b</sup> description of an art, which would "spread new ideas among men."<sup>7</sup> Egbert offers the following quotation from Saint-Simon, "What a most beautiful destiny for the arts, that of exercising over society a positive power, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of all the intellectual faculties, in the epoch of their greatest development."<sup>8</sup> Saint-Simon believed that artists could "stimulate sentiment" and therefore move humankind to "progress".

Thus, out of Saint-Simon's conception of the artist's role there developed an enduring dilemma for the radically avant-garde artist. Should he (sic) devote his art directly to forwarding radical social ideas as a member of an elite social avant-garde in accordance with the later doctrines of Saint-Simon, and still later those of Marxists and Marxist-Leninists? If so, must his art be socially realistic?...Or, on the contrary, should the artist consider himself to be simply a member of a purely artistic avant-garde? If the latter, should he divorce himself as well as his art entirely from all social interests, as the more extreme upholders of art for art's sake have insisted?<sup>9</sup>

In the west the term avant-garde seems to have lost much of its "Saint-Simonian" significance as a vehicle for social change and now only seems to refer to the idea of

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<sup>b</sup> "It has never been previously pointed out, I believe, that the figurative use of the word avant-garde to denote radically progressive leaders of both art and society...can be traced to Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825). This great French utopian socialist and ancestor of modern Communism as an acknowledged predecessor of Karl Marx employed avant-garde in this dual figurative sense only in some of his last writings." (Egbert, 340).



"new in one's field" as expressed in art-for-art's sake.<sup>10</sup> Egbert argues that, at best, this lack of awareness of the politics of the avant-garde may lead to a solely self-referential art limited in how it can affect society. At its worst an "apolitical" avant-garde may unwittingly serve to reinforce existing power systems and to rob art of the chance for awakening us to alternatives. Ebert describes the potential within the avant-garde for negative social action. The potential is that an avant-garde which simply focuses on novelty becomes a perfect partner for "promoters, bankers, journalists, dealers, publishers and the like...novel effects and money have nowadays become the primary considerations associated with excellence..."<sup>11</sup>

### **Poggioli on the Avant-Garde**

Poggioli's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* will be discussed next since both Bürger and Schulte-Sasse use Poggioli's work as a point for comparison and critique. Perhaps the most important sections in Poggioli's work, for this discussion, are his historical tracing of the meaning of the term avant-garde and his description of the relationships between the avant-garde and politics.

As a general introduction, Poggioli emphasizes that he will be treating his discussion of avant-garde as a sociological rather than an aesthetic proposition. "It is my intention in these pages to study avant-garde art as a historical concept, a centre of tendencies and ideas."<sup>12</sup> Because, as Poggioli argues, the avant-garde manifests itself in such a broad spectrum of works, and because the *motivation* of the avant-gardist work is so central to the movement itself, the avant-garde is best examined, "not under its species as art but through what it reveals, inside and outside of art itself, of a common psychological condition, a unique ideological fact."<sup>13</sup> In order to understand the commonalities among avant-gardist works, Poggioli describes certain basic characteristics of the avant-garde. Much of this analysis is based on ideas set forth in manifestos and programs. He defines manifesto as, "documents giving aesthetic and artistic precepts,"<sup>14</sup> and programs as, "more general and wide-ranging declarations,

visions, or overviews.”<sup>15</sup> Certainly in this study that focuses on the avant-garde within literature, manifestos are of primary importance. And since manifestos represent the “hardening into positions” for different movements within the larger avant-garde (futurism, surrealism, etc.), they offer information which describes how the artists position themselves and their work in relation to history, politics, and aesthetics.

Poggioli sets out what may be the most basic relationship between the avant-garde and society in general. The avant-garde sets itself, a society in a separate sense, in a posture of self-assertion or self defence, against society in the broadest sense. “We might even say that avant-garde ideology is a social phenomenon precisely because of the social or antisocial character of the cultural and artistic manifestations that it sustains and expresses.”<sup>16</sup> Poggioli’s illustrates this point with a quotation from Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant from his 1818 work entitled *De la mission de l’art est du rôle des artistes*:

Art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies: it is the forerunner and the revealer. Therefore, to know whether art worthily fulfils its proper mission as initiator, whether the artist is truly of the avant-garde, one must know where Humanity is going, know what the destiny of the human race is... To lay bare with a brutal brush all the brutalities, all the filth, which are at the base of our society.<sup>17</sup>

To Poggioli, this quotation also illustrates that in the early use of the term avant-garde, the artwork, “remained subordinate, even within the sphere of art, to the ideals of a radicalism which was not cultural but political...Furthermore, it is rather rare to find the concept or term outside political literature in the 1870s, nearly impossible in the preceding decade.”<sup>18</sup> Based on Poggioli’s analysis, the term avant-garde during the late 1800s described works that presented a political reaction to society rather than a solely aesthetic one. Poggioli’s interpretation of the development of the term reaffirms that of Egbert, both of whom indicate a split occurring in the term’s meaning.

Poggioli maps out a change in the use of the term avant-garde as occurring in France just after 1870. A secondary meaning of the term developed at that time which, as Poggioli describes it, existed *within* the boundaries of the original socio-political avant-garde. The secondary, subset if you will, was a cultural-artistic avant-garde. Until the late 1880s, these two movements, the larger political avant-garde and the cultural-artistic avant-garde subset, remained parallel.

This alliance of political and artistic radicalism...survived in France down to the first of the modern literary little magazines, significantly entitled *La Revue indépendante*. This magazine, founded about 1880, was perhaps the last organ to gather fraternally, under the same banner, the rebels of politics and the rebels of art, the representatives of advanced opinion in the two spheres of social and artistic thought.<sup>19</sup>

As examples of this period, Poggioli points to such writers as Rimbaud and Verlaine in Paris and their involvement in the Commune. In particular, Poggioli points to Rimbaud's *Lettre du Voyant* as highly characteristic of the avant-gardist attitude.<sup>20</sup> "No other work, public or private, in the course of the last hundred years has revealed the credo of avant-garde art with the lucid violence of this text...It is enough to read its pages to prove the novelty of the modern idea of the novel, as well as the modernity of the new idea of the modern."<sup>21</sup> The avant-garde desire to seek out the new and unseen implies a modernist faith in the progress of art.

After the founding of *La Revue*, Poggioli points to a split in the definition of the avant-garde. Whereas previously the cultural-artistic avant-garde was seen as a subset of the larger socio-political avant-garde, "what might be called the divorce of the two avant-gardes took place...expressions such as 'the art, or literature, of the avant-garde' came into vogue."<sup>22</sup> This break-up is of importance because not only did the two split from one another, but also what had once been the subordinate definition, the cultural-artistic avant-garde, became the primary definition:

Thus, what had up to then been a secondary, figurative meaning became instead the primary, in fact the only, meaning: the isolated image and the abbreviated term *avant-garde* became, without qualification, another synonym for the artistic *avant-garde*, while the political notion functioned almost solely as rhetoric and was no longer used exclusively by those faithful to the revolutionary and subversive ideal.<sup>23</sup>

Poggioli describes the importance of this distinction, and the confusion and often conflation of the two *avant-gardes* as, “exactly what impedes us from realizing how novelty in an artistic accomplishment is something quite different from novelty in the artist’s attitude *vis-à-vis* his own work, and *vis-à-vis* the aesthetic task imposed upon him by his own era.”<sup>24</sup> An example of *avant-garde* art that aspires to aesthetic change within a particular art form would be Mondrian’s geometric fields of colour or the work of the cubists to simultaneously represent dimensions of time on one canvas.

### **Bürger and Schulte-Sasse on the Avant-Garde**

The title of Peter Bürger’s book will recall to the American reader Renato Poggioli’s study of 1968, which bears the same title. Although Poggioli’s name is now rarely mentioned, the influence of his approach can still be seen in the most recent discussions of modernism, post-modernism, and the *avant-garde*.<sup>25</sup>

In the foreword to Bürger’s book, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Schulte-Sasses draws a comparison between Bürger’s and Poggioli’s definitions of the *avant-garde*. Poggioli, he argues, presents the *avant-garde* in literature as a reaction against the degeneration of language caused by commercialisation of writing. For Schulte-Sasse, Poggioli’s is basically an *aesthetic* proposal in which one form of language is set out in reaction against another form of language. Schulte-Sasse contrasts Poggioli’s *avant-*

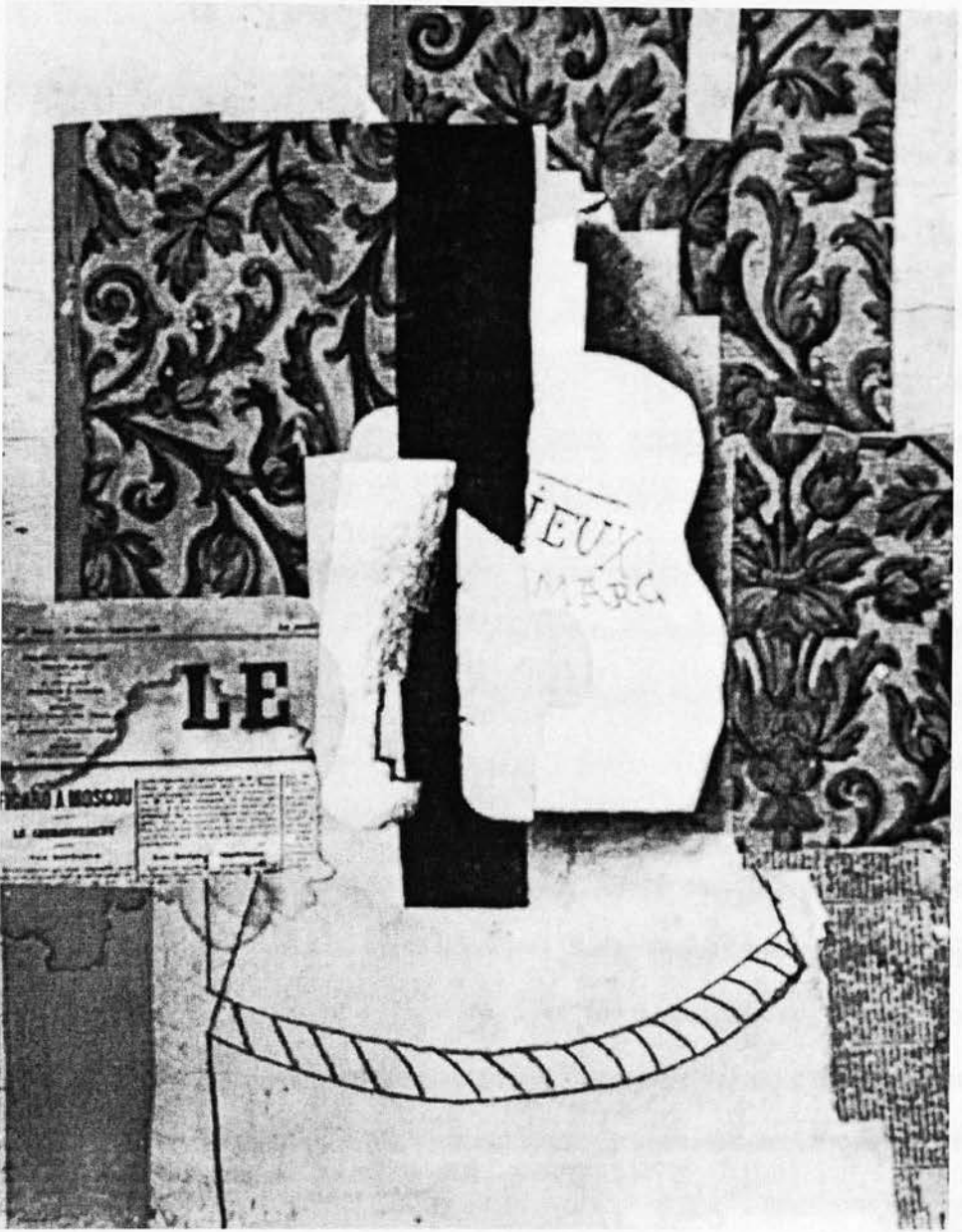


garde that challenges the use of language against Bürger's avant-garde that was determined "by the extent to which art comprehended the mode in which it functioned in bourgeois society, its comprehension of its own social status."<sup>26</sup>

For Bürger, then, the development of the avant-garde has nothing to do with a critical consciousness about language; it is not a continuation of tendencies already present in Aestheticism. Rather, for him the turning point from Aestheticism to the avant-garde is determined by the extent to which art comprehended the mode in which it functioned in bourgeois society, its comprehension of its own social status. The historical avant-garde of the twenties was the first movement in art history that turned against the institution "art" and the mode in which autonomy functions.<sup>27</sup>

And this could be seen as a reaction, says Schulte-Sasse, to the "significance of the book market in the national economy of the eighteenth century and in writers' new experience of having to compete with the mass appeal of popular literature."<sup>28</sup>

To reiterate, the distinction between Poggioli and Bürger that Schulte-Sasse presents is that Poggioli's avant-garde draws attention to the use of language in writing. For example, an avant-garde writer might seek to challenge assumptions about the linearity of the narrative, or the presence of a single viewpoint. For Bürger a work was not avant-gardist unless it commented on the institution of art and its role in a larger society. Poggioli's mapping of the development of the term indicating that the aesthetic avant-garde was once part of a larger political avant-garde is not discussed in Schulte-Sasse's forward. Rather, Schulte-Sasse argues that the art-for-art's sake mode of the avant-garde made it clear to the artist that this mode was incapable of affecting society. For Bürger, the point at which the artist recognizes this contradiction is crucial. It led to a "realization of the social *ineffectiveness* of their own medium, and thus to ever more radical confrontations between artists and society."<sup>29</sup> According to Schulte-Sasse and



**Figure 3.** Pablo Picasso, *Still Life*, 1912.

*Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 52.*

*One must proceed with great care as one attempts to define the intended aesthetic effects...of the first montage canvases. There is unquestionably an element of provocation in sticking a piece of newspaper on a painting. But this must not be overestimated...although there is destruction of the organic work that portrays reality, art itself is not being called into question, as it is in the historic avant-garde movements.*

Bürger, Poggioli is mistaken when he equates modernism, aestheticism, and avant-garde. Bürger sees aestheticism as only a necessary precondition to the avant-garde because it “permitted the avant-garde to clearly recognize the social inconsequentiality of autonomous art and, as the logical consequence of this recognition, to attempt to lead art back into social praxis.”<sup>30</sup>

To Bürger, returning art to social praxis is goal of the avant-garde artist. For Bürger this meant that art could help us to imagine a new society, to build a new society, and could be part of everyday life in this new society. “Only an art the contents of whose individual works is wholly distinct from the (bad) praxis of the existing society can be the centre that can be the starting point for the organization of a new life praxis.”<sup>31</sup> What examples does Bürger give of how the avant-garde seeks to integrate art and the praxis of life? Bürger’s definition of the praxis of life and how the avant-gardist work might be reintegrated within it are difficult to distil. As examples of works that move towards this reintegration, Bürger cites Duchamp’s ready-made work. By presenting a pre-fabricated urinal, Duchamp challenges the idea of production promoted by the institution of art. Duchamp signs an object that he did not make, challenging the idea of the artwork as product of a single producer. Duchamp’s work comments on the way in which the institution of art has made a signature more valuable than the work itself. Bürger states, “Duchamp’s provocation not only unmask the art market where the signature means more than the quality of the work; it radically questions the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art.”<sup>32</sup> However, Bürger notes that once a work like Duchamp’s urinal is thought important enough to put into a museum, the piece loses its power. Bürger argues that the “avant-garde movements did not put an end to the production of works of art, and that the social institution that is art proved resistant to the avant-gardist attack.”<sup>33</sup>

As Bürger sites Duchamp’s urinal as a challenge to the production of art in bourgeois culture, he presents the Dadaist Tzara’s instructions for making a poem, and Breton’s instructions for writing automatic texts as challenges to both the *production*

and the *reception* of art in bourgeois culture. Bürger states that because these two works are basically recipe books for “do-it-yourself” art, they turn those who under the bourgeoisie cultural norm would have been the *recipient* of the artwork (one who views a painting in a museum, or reads a novel) into the *producer* of art.

But such production is not to be understood as artistic production, but as part of a liberating life praxis. This is what is meant by Breton’s demand that poetry be practiced...Beyond the coincidence of producer and recipient that this demand implies, there is the fact that these concepts lose their meaning: producers and recipients no longer exist. All that remains is the individual who uses poetry as an instrument for living one’s life as best one can.<sup>34</sup>

The avant-gardist, according to Bürger, wants to destroy art’s autonomy as institution. But, he argues, this cannot happen within the context of bourgeois society.<sup>c</sup> Bürger also cites the use of art for the goals of consumerism, which bolsters bourgeois culture. As an example, Bürger discusses literature whose goal is to increase consumption, to entice people to purchase what they do not need. He calls this use of art as a false sublation; meaning that although it ties art (advertisement) to life (product), the artwork, “ceases to be an instrument of emancipation and becomes one of subjection.”<sup>35</sup> However, as much as Bürger recognizes the ability of the avant-gardist work to have this “revolutionary form,” he believes that it has not been successful in changing the established institution of art. Bürger’s position is basically pessimistic<sup>36</sup>, maintaining that: “the contradiction between the avant-garde’s bringing reality into art, and the bourgeois institution’s keeping art separate from reality cannot be resolved within bourgeois society.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>c</sup> As a footnote, Bürger asks how successful the Russian avant-gardist artists were in integrating art and life praxis.



## Guy Debord and The Society of the Spectacle

Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1968) proposes a role for the avant-garde beyond art. He sees this role as built upon the work of previous avant-gardes including the Surrealists but as fundamentally unique. The movement Debord helped to found, the Situationists International (1957-1972) acknowledged its debt to previous avant-gardes but argued that art separate from life was powerless to change society. Anselm Jappe describes the relationship of the Situationists to previous avant-gardes. "If the Situationists considered themselves to be the real heirs of the avant-garde movements of the 1910-25 period, it was precisely inasmuch as they were *no longer* artists." Rather, Jappe quotes Debord as stating, the Situationists were "the only movement able, by incorporating the survival of art into the art of living, to speak to the project of the authentic artist."<sup>38</sup>

To understand what Debord proposed for the avant-garde, one must first realize that his work was based on a Marxist understanding of economics and politics. In particular, Debord builds upon Marx's ideas of alienation, use value vs. exchange value, and commodity form. To Debord humans in bourgeois society are alienated from themselves and each other. The sources of this alienation include capitalist separation of worker from work, the separation of humans from the material world due to capitalist focus on exchange value rather than their use value, and the pervasive pseudo-world of the capitalist spectacle, set up to perpetuate consumption and continuation of the capitalist economy. Debord described the "spectacle" as the pervasive mechanism that protected the capitalism.

The power of the spectacle is not simply the promotion of the seductive qualities of products, or political propaganda transmitted through media.

Rather, it is the entirety of social activity that is appropriated by the spectacle for its own ends. From city planning to political

parties of every tendency, from art to science, from everyday life to human passions and desires, everywhere we find reality replaced by images.<sup>39</sup>

The spectacle exists to propagate the capitalist system and the alienation of workers from labour and material life required to continue that system.

The spectacle is a permanent opium war waged to make it impossible to distinguish goods from commodities, or true satisfaction from a survival that increases according to its own logic.<sup>40</sup>

Because the spectacle permeates *all* aspects of life, art that simply challenges artistic practices, or even challenges the role of art in society would be powerless to change it. Debord sees the failure of the Surrealists as an example of that powerlessness. To Debord, the work of the Surrealists that once acted as a criticism of the emptiness of bourgeois life became “a positive expression of the same emptiness.”<sup>41</sup> Surrealist works were eventually absorbed into the system of the spectacular: Duchamp’s *Mona Lisa* with a moustache is now “no more interesting than the original version.”<sup>42</sup> Debord argued that in order to challenge the spectacle, the avant-garde had to move beyond separate categories of art, theory, criticism and political action.

The goal of the Situationists was nothing less than the end of capitalism and the transfer of the control of the means of production from the bourgeois to the proletariat. Given the hyperbolic goals of the Situationists, “...they envisaged the creation of a new civilization and a genuine transformation of humanity,”<sup>43</sup> and their understanding of the power of the capitalist system and the spectacle that supported it, what actions could they propose? Part of the answer to this question is that the Situationists did not see their role

as *leading* the proletariat in the construction of a new society. Debord assigns that role to “workers’ councils”.<sup>d</sup>

That “Long Sought political form whereby the economic emancipation of labour might finally be achieved” has taken clear outline in this century, in the space of revolutionary workers councils vesting all decision-making power in themselves and federating with one another through the exchange of delegates answerable to the base and recallable at any time.<sup>44</sup>

Once embodied in the power of the workers’ councils – a power destined to supplant all other powers worldwide – the proletarian movement becomes its own product; this product is the producer himself (sic), and in his own eyes the producer has himself as his goal. Only in this context can the spectacle’s negation of life be negated in its turn.<sup>45</sup>

The role of the Situationists' avant-garde would be as,

...a Conspiracy of Equals, a general staff that does not want troops...the only thing we organize is the detonator; the explosion must be free, escaping permanently from our control just as it does from anyone else’s...the SI does not want disciples.<sup>46</sup>

Debord did not see the role of the avant-garde as one of a “priesthood” that would lead society like Saint-Simon. But how would the work of the SI organize the “detonator”? What were the elements of the unified practice? In *The Society and the Spectacle*, Debord refers to his proposed avant-garde as the “revolutionary organization.” But argues that just as art alone could have no effect on the spectacle,

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<sup>d</sup> For a description of Debord’s proposal for workers’ councils see Chapter 4, “The Proletariat as Subject and Representation.” (Debord, 48-90).

political action alone was equally powerless. Debord explains, “the revolutionary organization must learn that it can no longer combat alienation by means of alienated forms of struggle.”<sup>47</sup> What Debord proposed instead was union of theory and action. “The SI...emphasized that...the unification of life and art, which so many other movements, even the most progressive, deemed desirable but far and distant, was in fact attainable and imminent.”<sup>48</sup>

Debord sought to expose the falseness of bourgeois idea of happiness promoted by the spectacle “and maintained by a system of publicity that includes Malraux’s aesthetics as well as the imperatives of Coca-Cola – an idea of happiness *whose crisis must be provoked on every occasion by every means* (emphasis mine).<sup>49</sup> Debord wanted to change the way people viewed their daily lives, not the way they viewed painting. He believed that awakening people to the pervasiveness of the spectacle and the falseness of freedom and happiness within the capitalist economic system was the first step to building a new society. He states, “there is nothing to be expected until the masses in action awaken to the conditions that are imposed on them in all domains of life, and to the practical means of changing them.”<sup>50</sup>

Part of Debord’s proposed practice was the method of *détournement*. It is a critical approach based on the work of Hegel and Marx whereby elements from daily life are recombined in works such as writing, collage, film or urban design to expose the reality of the spectacle.

*Détournement*...is the fluid language of anti-ideology. It occurs within a type of communication aware of its inability to enshrine any inherent and definitive certainty... *Détournement* finds its cause on nothing but its own truth as critique at work in the present.<sup>51</sup>

*Détournement*...clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions, it cannot fail to be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of real class struggle. The cheapness of its products is the

heavy artillery that breaks through all the Chinese walls of understanding. It is a real means of proletarian artistic education, the first step toward a literary communism.<sup>52</sup>

Within Debord's own work, which focused on the mediums of writing, collage and film, we find a constant effort to expose the power of the spectacle. In a speech, delivered by tape recorder at a conference at the Centre of Sociological Studies of the Group for Research on Everyday Life in 1961, convened by Henri Lefebvre<sup>e</sup>, Debord challenged the academic separation of researcher from subject. Rather than studying how others lived, Debord stated that sociologists should be aware of their own lives. In particular, researchers needed to see that they too existed within the spectacle and their daily life was colonized by capitalism. Debord presented by tape recorder to highlight what he saw as the fallacy that researchers could act as a community separate from the larger world.

This slight discomfiting break with accustomed routine could serve to bring directly into the field of questioning of every day life (a question otherwise completely abstract) the conference itself, as well as any number of other forms of using time or objects, forms that are considered "normal" and not even noticed, and which ultimately condition us. With such detail, as with everyday life as a whole, alteration is always the necessary and sufficient condition for experimentally bringing into clear view the object of our study, which would otherwise remain uncertain – an object which is itself less to be studied than to be altered.<sup>53</sup>

To Debord, it was more important that sociologists understand and recognize the spectacle in their own lives than in the lives of others. The conference was part of

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<sup>e</sup> Jappe and others have described the relationship between Lefebvre and Debord. See Jappe, 73-81.



everyday life and therefore required their criticism. And, Debord argues, unless the goal of the study of everyday life is to transform it then the study is useless.

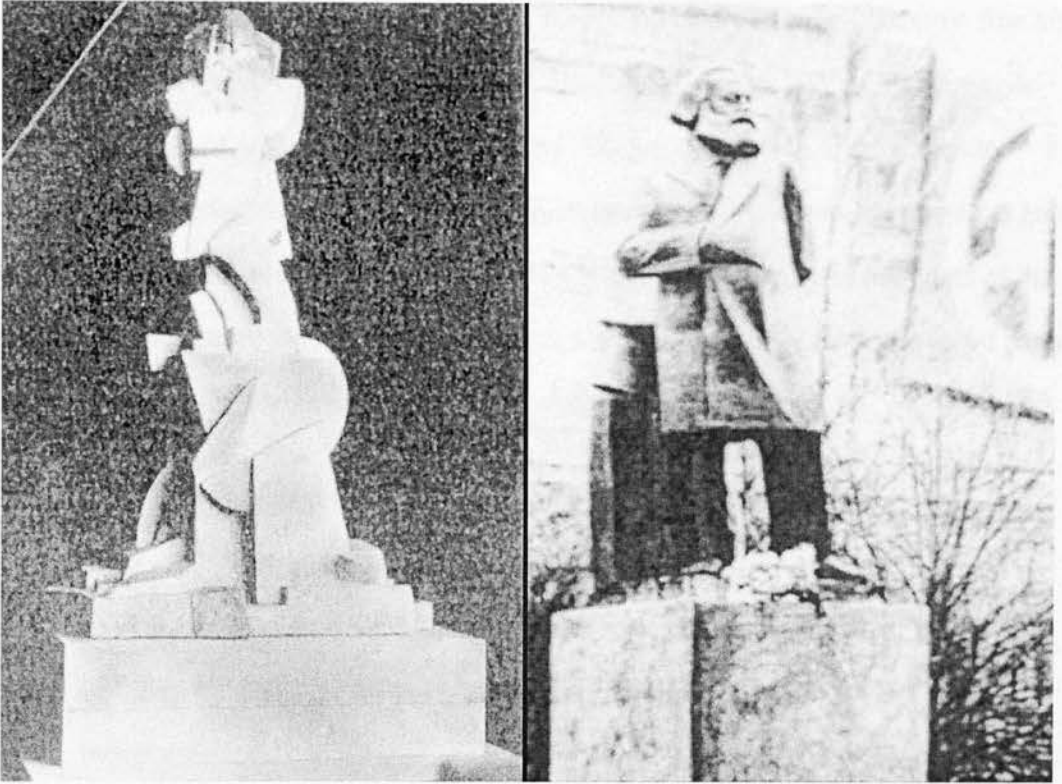
### **Buck-Morss on the Avant-Garde as Rupture, and Benjamin's Historical Materialism as Avant-Garde**

Contrary to Bürger's position of pessimism, Buck-Morss cites a future for a political avant-garde. Specifically, it is the avant-garde's ability to draw focused attention to political issues that Buck-Morss sees as worthwhile. The following quotation is not unlike the writing of Debord and his vision for the avant-garde.

What counts is that the aesthetic experience teach us something new about our world, that it shock us out of moral complacency and political resignation, and that it take us to task for the overwhelming lack of social imagination which characterizes so much of cultural production in all its forms.<sup>54</sup>

The avant-garde, for Buck-Morss is successful in its ability to cause a "rupture" in history. The artwork "shocks" the viewer into attention. It is important to discuss what, for Buck-Morss, is *not* avant-garde. The difference between the two relates strongly to the ideas of history and time.

While other authors focus on Paris in discussions of the avant-garde, Buck-Morss focuses on the former Soviet Union just after the October Revolution. She contrasts the art of the Soviet *avant-garde* with the artwork supported by the Soviet political *vanguard*. She uses the term vanguard to indicate the Bolshevik party. According to Buck-Morss, the vanguard favoured artworks that would be easily understood or read by "the people" and that portrayed the strength of the revolutionary government. They used art in order to stabilize the political climate by creating a new history that appeared to lead inevitably to their political victory. This art had an effect that was the opposite of the avant-garde. It acted to shore-up the present political system



**Figure 4.** Boris Korolev, manquette for a statue of Karl Marx, 1919 (left), Aleksandr Matveev, statue of Karl Marx (right), erected in Petrograd, 1918.

*Susan Buck-Morss, Dreamworld and Catastrophe (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), 50.*

Buck-Morss contrasts the avant-garde form of the first portrait that was never executed, with the legibility of the second. The second portrait serves to position Marx and therefore the Bolshevik within a mythic history.

by creating a customized history of the past. As an example Buck-Morss shows the painting *Entry of the Red Army in 1920 into Krasnoiarsk* by Nikolai Nikonov. She also contrasts two different monuments of Marx. The first sculpture design, by Boris Korolev, is abstract and was never constructed. The second design, by Aleksandr Matveev, is representational and was built and installed. Buck-Morss contrasts the goals of the avant-garde that sought to challenge and break out of history to the goals of the artists of the vanguard that sought to represent a particular history that reinforced party goals. As part of the vanguard, Buck-Morss states,

...art was no longer to inspire imagination in a way that set reality into question, but, rather, to stage affirmative representations of reality that encouraged an uncritical acceptance of the party's monopolistic right to control the direction of social transformation.<sup>55</sup>

Central to Buck-Morss' concept of the avant-garde is that an artwork (by artwork Buck-Morss refers to any cultural object including a text, photograph, musical recording) *challenge* the idea of history as progress. For example, in the case of Bolshevik Russia, an avant-gardist work would seek to debunk the myth that history led inevitably to the October Revolution and the rule of the Bolshevik Party. It would draw attention to the idea that things *could* be otherwise. For Buck-Morss, the goal of the avant-garde is to interrupt the flow of history and culture. The historicist has the opposite goal. The historicist seeks to emphasize the continuum of history, and its inevitability. Why does the idea of history as a continuum present a problem to Buck-Morss? For both Buck-Morss and Benjamin, history is the story of the winners. In a political conflict the more powerful group goes on to tell the "official" story. Similarly, the culture that survives after a political conflict is the culture of the victor. This is the history and the culture that the avant-gardist work seeks to disrupt and challenge.





**Figure 5.** Nikolai Nikonov, *Entry of the Red Army in 1920 into Krasnoiarsk*, 1923. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), 53.

Buck-Morss captions this illustration with the following quotation from the Declaration of Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia:

*Our civic duty before mankind is to set down, artistically, and documentarily, the revolutionary impulse of this great moment in history. We will depict the present day: the life of the Red Army, the workers, the peasants, the revolutionaries, and the heroes of labor.*

Buck-Morss describes the ability of historical materialism, as developed and practiced by Walter Benjamin to have an avant-gardist effect. In historical materialism, elements of the past are examined in light of present concerns.

The juxtaposition of these past fragments with our present concerns might have the power to challenge the complacency and resignation of our times, when “history” is said by its victors to have successfully completed its course, and the new global-capitalist hegemony claims to have run the competition off the field. To be engaged in this intellectual task...is politically worth our while.<sup>56</sup>

Buck-Morss argues that Walter Benjamin’s process of historical materialism has the ability to rupture the false continuum of history. Buck-Morss describes how this work relates to Bürger’s concept of the avant-garde.

A student of Surrealism, Bürger sees the avant-garde movement as representing a crisis within art and a radical rupture from earlier bourgeois aesthetics, and Benjamin stands on the contemporary side of this great divide.<sup>57</sup>

Where other artists and art historians focus on the seriality of the history of art, Benjamin sets up works which reflect “literary traditions as *discontinuous*, a convergence of the long-past with the most modern, so that insights into the nature of allegory that have not been achieved until the modern era can be fruitful when applied retroactively, leaping over centuries of literary “development” that intervene.<sup>58</sup>

Buck-Morss does not directly state that she views Benjamin’s work as avant-gardist. However, based on the idea that she positions Benjamin as part of the movement that would fulfil Bürger’s conception of the avant-garde, and that she cites Benjamin’s work

as acting in the same way as an avant-gardist work, it is possible to discuss the idea that historical materialism as a critical approach can have avant-gardist results. Restated, Benjamin's historical materialism acts to rupture the continuum of history in order to draw attention to political issues, and to promote alternatives.

## Summary

Each author presents not one, but a set of avant-gardes. All described the avant-garde relative to the objectives of the artist or group of artists. The most basic distinction between the various avant-gardes described was whether the artist set out to challenge aesthetic approaches within their art form (Cubists), the role of their art form in society (Dadaists), the economic and or political foundations of society (Situationists) or to promote an existing political structure (Soviet Realists). While authors like Egbert, Poggioli and Bürger identify various time periods for and narratives regarding how the different avant-gardes developed, it was the motivation of the artist that was important.

Egbert, Poggioli, Bürger, Debord and Buck-Morss argued that even avant-gardes that did not intend to have a political or social effect, namely the art-for-art's sake avant-garde, could be used by the spectacle to reinforce the capitalist system. For example, the shock value of the avant-garde was easily translated into images for product advertising. Similarly, the championing of the "new" by the avant-garde could help drive consumer desire for new products. Similarly, the artwork that sought to challenge the institution of art could eventually be subsumed into the institution itself.

Both Debord and Bürger emphasized the importance of art returning to "everyday life." However, Debord argued for the destruction of the category of art as a necessary precondition to the process of unification. Bürger saw Dadaist Tzara's instructions for making a poem, and Breton's instructions for writing automatic texts as examples of reuniting life and art by challenging the ideas of *production* and *reception* of art in bourgeois culture. Bürger states that, by devising methods by which non-writers could produce writing, these methods bring the praxis of art back to daily life. Debord

saw these methods as interesting precursors but ultimately powerless because they still worked within the mode of art. They switched who produced the work, but the work itself was still art separated from life. Debord and Buck-Morss were the most optimistic for the future of a politically motivated avant-garde. Both proposed a future for the avant-garde. Each saw the importance of drawing attention to the inequities of the capitalist system. Bürger believed that an avant-garde art united to the praxis of life was impossible within the current capitalist system. Debord and Buck-Morss saw the avant-garde as a way of dismantling the system itself.

How do the descriptions of the avant-garde, its limitations and its potentials as described by writers on the fine arts, relate to the ways in which the avant-garde has been described in landscape architecture? Do works of landscape architecture or landscape architectural writing seek to challenge the boundaries of the discipline? Is there an “art-for-art’s-sake” avant-garde in landscape architecture? Are there designers who challenge the way the institution of landscape architecture defines its role in society? Is there an avant-garde in landscape architecture that seeks to “expose the falseness of bourgeois happiness”? Do avant-garde landscape architects see links between their work and the avant-garde in other fields?

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<sup>1</sup> Donald D. Egbert, *The Idea of ‘Avant-garde’ in Art and Politics*, 1967, p. 339-366

<sup>2</sup> Pers com, April, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Lance Neckar, “Two Near Voids,” *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 1.

Patrick M. Condon, “Radical Romanticism,” *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 8.

Elizabeth K. Meyer, “The Public Park as Avant-Garde (Landscape) Architecture: A Comparative Interpretation of Two Parisian Parks, Parc de la Villette (1983-1990) and Parc des Buttes-Chaumont (1864-1867),” *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 16-26.

David Merrill, “Christo, Smithson, Ayccock, Heizer: “The Avant-Garde and the Landscape” as a Metaphor of Sexuality, Life, and Mind,” *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 57-67.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Egbert, 343.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 366.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 366.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 4.

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- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 9-10.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 11.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 215.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 215-216.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 12.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>25</sup> Jochen Schulte-Sasse, Foreword to *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, by Peter Burger (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), vii.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., xiv.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., ix.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., xiv.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 49-50.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 52.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 56-57.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 53.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid, 54.
- <sup>36</sup> Buck-Morss, 1992, 227.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 69.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., 7.
- <sup>40</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 30.
- <sup>41</sup> Jappe, 64.
- <sup>42</sup>42 Guy Debord, "Methods of Détournement," trans. Ken Knabb. *Les Lèvres Nues*, no. 8, (1956): 1. Retrieved June 2001 from <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/3>
- <sup>43</sup> Jappe, 65.
- <sup>44</sup> Debord, 1955, 86.
- <sup>45</sup> Jappe, 87.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 93-94.
- <sup>47</sup> Debord, 1994, 89.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 69.
- <sup>49</sup> Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," trans. Ken Knabb. *Les Lèvres Nues*, no. 6, (1955): 1. Retrieved June 2001 from <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/2>
- <sup>50</sup> Debord, 1955, 3.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 146.
- <sup>52</sup> Debord, 1956, 3.
- <sup>53</sup> Debord, 1961, 1.
- <sup>54</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2000), 63.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid, 62.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid, 45-46.
- <sup>57</sup> Buck-Morss, 1997, 225.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.



## CHAPTER 2: WHAT KINDS OF CRITICAL WORK BASED ON THE AVANT-GARDE CURRENTLY EXIST IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE?

This thesis proposes the development of a politically avant-gardist critical practice in landscape architecture. The goal of this chapter is to determine if such an approach already exists and to understand the way in which the term avant-garde is defined in the discipline. The first section of the chapter looks at critical works on the concept of the avant-garde. The second section examines works of landscape architecture that are characterized as avant-garde within the profession.

The avant-garde and landscape architecture has been a particular topic of debate in the United States in the last ten years. Writers engaged in this debate in the English language have published almost exclusively in journals produced in the United States. For example, only one article on the landscape architecture and the avant-garde was published in Australia, one in Canada, and none in Britain. Articles on the avant-garde and landscape architecture have appeared in both *Landscape Journal* and *Landscape Architecture Magazine* and each has produced a special issue relating to the topic. These two publications are the only periodicals in the United States that focus upon landscape architecture as a discipline and practice. The mission statement included in each edition of *Landscape Architecture Magazine* is the statement for the American Society of Landscape Architects: "...to lead, to educate, and to participate in the careful stewardship, wise planning, and artful design of our cultural and natural environments."<sup>1</sup> The mission statement included in each edition of the *Landscape Journal* is: "*Landscape Journal* is dedicated to the dissemination of the results of academic research and scholarly investigation of interest to practitioners, academicians, and students of landscape architecture."

## Avant-Gardist Criticism and the *Landscape Journal*

The single issue of the *Landscape Journal*, titled, *The Avant-Garde and the Landscape: Can They Be Reconciled* is an important source for information on the avant-garde and landscape architectural criticism. This issue represents the only monograph or book to specifically deal with landscape architecture and the avant-garde. It contains a set of contradictory definitions of avant-garde and a set of varied approaches to applying this term in landscape architectural criticism. The single issue was based on papers written for a conference at the University of Minnesota in 1989 by the same title. One of the editors, Lance Neckar described the intent of the conference and the special issue.

Central to our intent in organizing the conference was the fundamental desire to bring matter to two near voids in landscape architecture today: a significant exposition of theory and, by extension, a significant exposition and criticism of design, designated here as 'work.' That gave us a dual structure within which to call for 'papers': theoretical papers and theory-informed work.<sup>2</sup>

The conference and the single issue organizers sought to address a perceived lack of a critical and theoretical basis for the discipline of landscape architecture and a lack of built work based on such criticism and theory.<sup>a</sup> The title they chose indicates an attitude toward both landscape and the avant-garde: "The avant-garde and landscape architecture: can they be reconciled?" The term "reconciled" implies that there is a fundamental incongruity between the landscape and the avant-garde. The question mark indicates that this incongruity may or may not be reconcilable. The front cover of the special issue illustrates this relationship. A simple black and white photo of an orchard

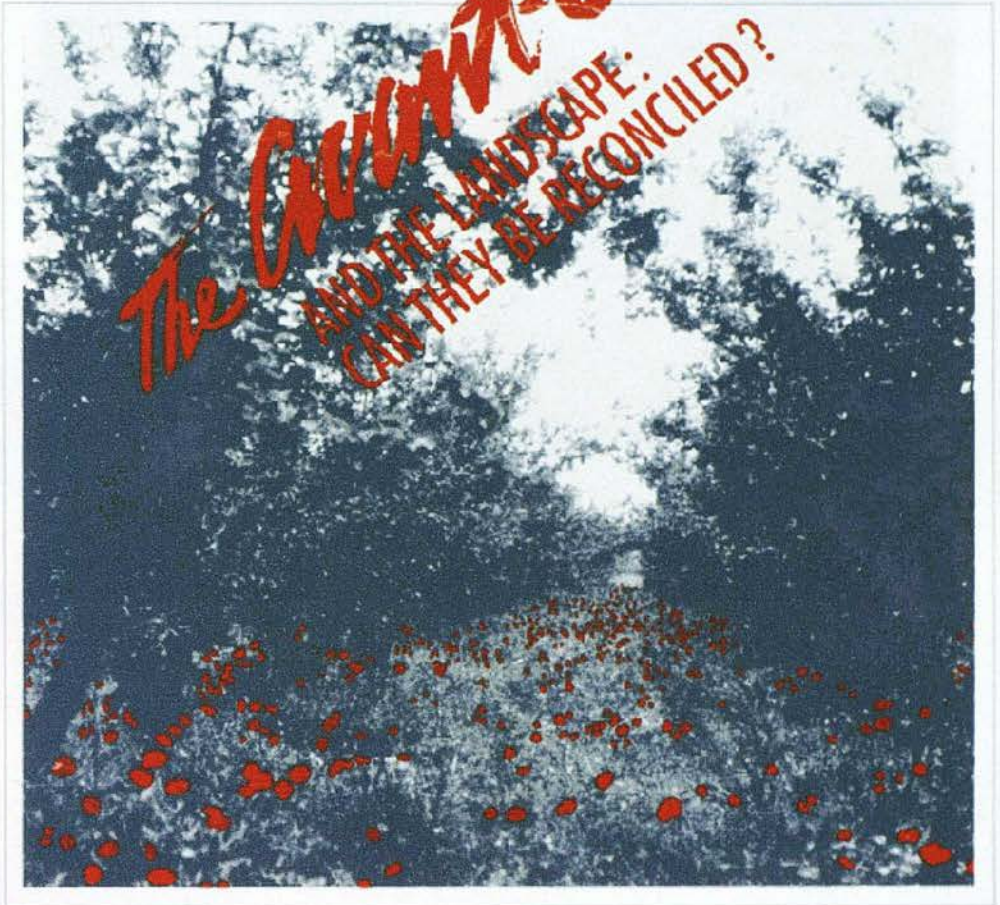
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<sup>a</sup> This point, that landscape architecture, as compared to architecture or the fine arts, lacks a strong theoretical or critical basis has been raised by a number of writers. In particular, see Eaton, Marcella, 1998, p. 286. See also, James Corner, "Discourse on Theory II," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 2 (1991): 116. For a discussion on the need for critical thinking and critical inquiry see Margaret McAvin, ed, "Landscape Architecture and Critical Inquiry," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 2 (1991): 155-172.

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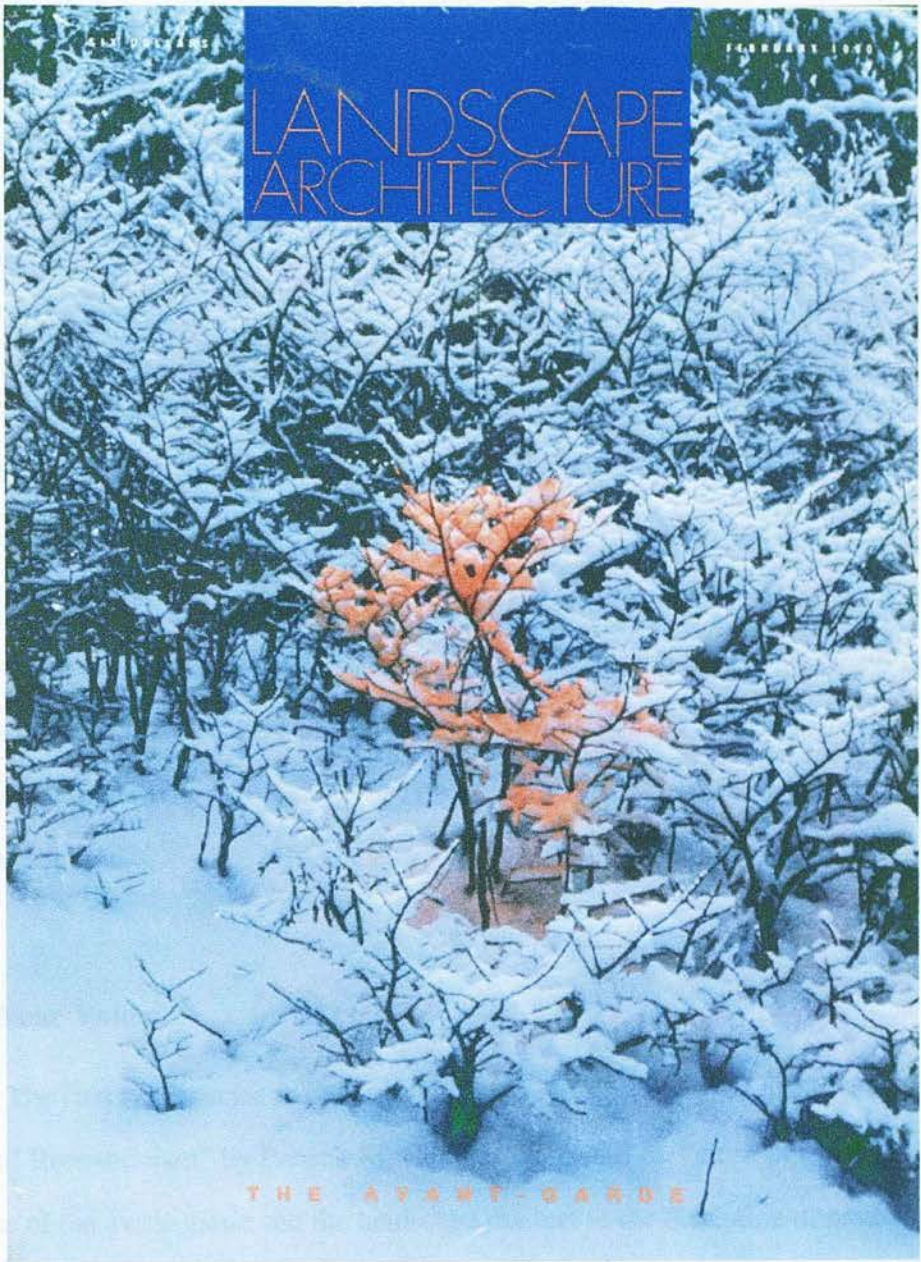
Volume 16, Number 1, Spring 1991



**Figure 6.** Cover of special issue of *Landscape Journal* on the avant-garde.

*Spring 1991.*





**Figure 7.** Cover of special issue of *Landscape Architecture Magazine* on the avant-garde.

*February 1990.*

is framed in the main portion of the cover. It is a basic perspective shot with orchard rows vanishing into a field in the distance. The space between the rows is covered with low grassy vegetation. Boldly “painted” over the top of this image and spilling outside of the frame is the title of the issue, with *avant-garde* written in rough, red, bold font. The black and white vegetation has been flooded with flame red “flowers”. The title covers the photo and bleeds over through the journal masthead. There is something sensationalistic about the design. The pastoral landscape is covered in “graffiti”. A black and white image of a place of calmly overgrown order boxed on the cover of an academic journal has been superimposed with an aggressive, vibrant pattern and message. The background landscape is passive, staid and known. The foreground *avant-garde* is abrupt, shocking and aggressive. The first two articles, written by the conference and special issue organizers, both continue the general idea that there is something fundamentally at odds between the landscape and the *avant-garde*. Furthermore, they both indicate that more than one kind of *avant-garde* has chosen the landscape as their site of action.

### **“Two Near Voids”**

The first two articles in the journal, “Two Near Voids” by Lance Neckar and “Radical Romanticism” by Patrick M. Condon were said to: “attempt to set out why the issue of the *avant-garde* and the landscape matters to the discipline of landscape architecture specifically and the culture that landscape architecture touches more generally.”<sup>3</sup> Neckar states that conference organizers solicited both “theoretical papers and theory informed work,”<sup>4</sup> and that while the conference papers were “effusive,” “the discourse had an amorphous and fugitive quality. It has taken this issue of the *Landscape Journal* to begin in a small way to mark its theoretical space.”<sup>5</sup> It is not unusual for landscape architectural conferences to solicit both built and theoretical projects, but Neckar makes a point in this introductory article to set out what he sees as the *relationship* between built work and written discourse:



In our field a theory-based criticism will give a potent dialogue on the efficacy of work. This work, the evidence of landscape architecture, will spawn a new cycle of criticism, and recursively, we will begin to fill the two near voids.<sup>6</sup>

For Neckar, critical dialogue informs built work. Built work becomes the “site” for further criticism and discussion. Neckar does not indicate how a critical or built avant-gardist work would be different from one based on a different concept. However, the primacy of criticism to practice is clearly stated. Neckar says more in his essay about the role of criticism and practice and the need for theory in design than he does to set out any description of or agenda for what an avant-gardist criticism or practice might be. He argues, however, that it may be because of a lack of critical discourse on the avant-garde that there is a paucity of built work submitted as conference entries.

I suspect that many people thought that we were looking for representations of the obvious kind of work that might be called avant-garde: Martha Schwartz,<sup>b</sup> Peter Walker, and others of their sculptural persuasion came immediately to mind. We were, to be sure, interested in this well-publicized group; yet we were hopeful of finding more work...that could also bring an articulate, verbal presence to the scene.<sup>7</sup>

Neckar’s statement implies that a certain kind of built landscape may already be considered as avant-garde. The choice of Schwartz and Walker as examples is not surprising. Schwartz, as will be discussed later in this thesis, has been called avant-garde for her theoretical and built work. Like Schwartz, Walker has a strong, individual, sculptural design style. While Neckar feels that their work is commonly thought of as avant-garde, he also proposes that there is work outside of this visual impact genre that he would consider to be avant-garde.

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<sup>b</sup> Martha Schwartz will be discussed later in this chapter because, as Neckar points out, she is considered to be an avant-gardist in the field of landscape architectural design and theory.

Neckar discusses Harlequin Plaza and Candlestick Park, two projects by landscape architect George Hargreaves, as being “emblematic of the issues that we were trying to raise.”<sup>8</sup>: Neckar presents the projects in the context of his understanding of the role of landscape architecture: to aid in human understanding of the landscape, specifically the role of landscape in human survival.

...[L]andscape architecture is not about some kind of formal appropriation from architecture or art to solve a problem. It is about the way, we as humans, understand the realm of our sustenance, our lives, or survival when form reveals the landscape’s latent powers in nature.<sup>9</sup>

Neckar offers George Hargreaves’ projects as very different approaches to this thematic:

On Harlequin Plaza, culture beats back nature in a tour de force; on Candlestick Point, culture provides a rich setting for the exposition of nature’s effects. Where Harlequin Plaza speaks to apocalyptic culture in its language, Candlestick Point invokes nature’s language to heighten the effects of an awe-striking vastness, of incomprehensibility.<sup>10</sup>

Harlequin Plaza will be discussed later in this chapter since it has been described as an example of an avant-garde landscape. The plaza is part of a corporate complex outside of Denver Colorado, U.S. designed in 1982. From the site the mountains are visible. The plaza itself is visually dominated by a bold black and white diamond-shaped paving pattern. For Neckar, Harlequin Plaza “revealed the potency of human intervention in landscape where we expect nature, such as vast mountains, to dominate both pictorially and as a system.”<sup>11</sup>

Neckar compares this plaza to Candlestick Point Park. According to Neckar, Candlestick Point Park is a design where “culture provides a rich setting for the exposition of nature’s effects.”<sup>12</sup> The park itself is sited on a landfill outside of San Francisco, CA. Since no trees could be planted on the surface because of the clay cap beneath, the site has a rough exposed quality. “Candlestick Point Park...is about a

deformed landscape that has been reformed on nature's terms; and the human intervention, past and proposed, here only heightens the understanding of the direct power of nature."<sup>13</sup> The Hargreaves company website gives a similar description of the relationship between Candlestick Park and nature:

A true collaborative design by Hargreaves Associates, Mack Architects, and the artist Douglas Hollis, Candlestick Park breaks new ground in cultural facility design. A language of location was developed from the dominant elements on the site -- wind and water, ships and docks, and the landfill under the park itself -- and manifested itself in the detailed articulation of the place.<sup>14</sup>

Neckar presents the two Hargreaves projects as two different kinds of avant-garde landscape architecture. At Harlequin Plaza, culture dominates nature and in Candlestick Park, culture heightens the visitor's sense of awe about nature. Positioning these projects against Neckar's belief that the goal of landscape architecture is to reveal "landscape's latent powers in nature," so that we may, "understand the realm of our sustenance, our lives, our survival,"<sup>15</sup> we understand that he values Candlestick Point Park more than Harlequin Plaza. However, he implies that Harlequin Plaza is the *more* avant-gardist of the two.

Hargreaves stubbornly refuses to diminish the cultural and natural potency of this park in all of its rich specificity; this kind of impolitic, if you will, avant-garde position is didactic, not just antagonistic, and certainly not nihilistic. In this latter sense it suggests that at Candlestick Point reconciliation occurs because the landscape is made vivid on its primal terms, not on some bland interpretive plane.<sup>16</sup>

It would seem in this quotation that Neckar is criticizing Harlequin Plaza because it is a cultural interpretation of nature. Rather than exposing the "primal nature," it exposes a cultural reading of nature. Neckar goes on to state that the reason why in landscape architecture "nature" should take precedent over "culture" is that:

“in a multicultural society, these meanings are illegible.”<sup>17</sup> This kind of statement will be seen in later articles in the special issue. These questions include: Is universal meaning in the landscape possible? Is experience of nature not culturally based or can it offer such universal meanings?

In addition to comparing a culturally derived metaphoric landscape and a vivid ‘primal’ landscape, Neckar develops compares designs that explore nature on ecological terms vs. those that employ the sublime to amplify and reveal “the landscape’s latent powers in nature.”<sup>18</sup> The distinction between an environmental/ecological/functional design and a nature amplifying “sublime” is important to Neckar’s understanding of the avant-garde in landscape architecture. Neckar sees Candlestick Point Park as an example of a work of sublime landscape architecture. The following quotation, though lengthy, sheds light on Neckar’s position. Of Candlestick Point Park, Neckar states:

There are, of course, problems of all kinds with this work and the kind of work it represents. Not the least of these problems is that expectations about work for a public body on a public space has somehow gotten to the point that all sites, regardless of intrinsic character, must be made habitable by the lowest common-denominator standards, that is, we must always “solve” the environmental problems to make the park functional. This is a tired legacy of Modernism, and it also has something to do with the excessive politeness and denials of the early Victorian designers of landscape. Parenthetically, it has little to do with Olmsted, who realized that the park is archetypally the landscape of the hunt and therefore literally dangerous, especially at night. <sup>19</sup>

Neckar’s single endnote relates to this statement about Olmsted saying, “Olmsted, in response to these foreseen dangers, recommended lighting the transverse drives and closure of Central Park at nightfall as a gesture toward public safety in an urban context, a minor palliative, given the times.”<sup>20</sup>



What we find in these quotations is a conglomeration of assertions regarding what is important in landscape architecture. These assertions are worthwhile to unravel. Neckar raises the idea that the public nature of landscape architecture makes certain things important. But what this importance relates to for Neckar is in the design *concept* of a project. Neckar believes that landscape architecture should base conceptual design development on the aesthetics of the sublime rather than on functional, cultural, or environmental issues. He refers to these issues as the lowest common denominators of design, which, one might then infer, makes the aesthetics of the sublime of a higher intellectual order. The relative importance of low/functional/environmental and high/sublime is carried to the point where the sublime, as a design approach, supersedes and completely *eclipses* functional concerns. This is seen in Neckar's description of Central Park, where public safety is sacrificed in order to protect the design concept of the archetypical hunt.

In summary, Neckar's interpretation of avant-garde is concerned with what intellectual level a design reaches, and how a particular work spurs dialog within the field regarding human's relationship to nature through a very specific aesthetic – the sublime. It seems to assume a time in which man understood his position in the natural world and that by invoking feelings of the sublime (in this case a kind of awed fear of nature) we might recapture this relationship. The role of the avant-garde work is to amplify our experience of the natural world.

### **“Radical Romanticism”**

The second introductory article, by Patrick M. Condon, shares some of the rhetoric of Neckar's article. Condon also points to a lost human sensual relationship with the earth/nature/landscape (he uses these interchangeably) that existed at an earlier time. Condon argues that a particular kind of avant-garde art/design can help to reinstate this relationship. Because his proposed aesthetic is so closely related to his understanding of 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism, he calls it “radical romanticism.”



To introduce the concept of radical romanticism, Condon draws parallels between the current time (1991) and the time of the romantic era:

An artistic avant-garde is interested in the landscape once again. The last time that a North American artistic elite evinced [his word] a similar interest was during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. For those romantic era artists and designers, the landscape provided the best context for making synthetic and universal artistic statements.<sup>21</sup>

He calls the romantic movement an avant-garde movement because “the artistic and avant-garde of the romantic era rejected the rationalist enlightenment era notion that life’s most important phenomena could be entirely explained as a consequence of matter in motion...”<sup>22</sup> According to Condon, the goal of romantic involvement in the landscape was to create an “epiphany” beyond the rational and scientific.

Naturally, romantic era poets, novelists, painters and designers gravitated to the landscape when seeking this sense of fusion between the material and ethereal realm. They sought the combination of mental state and landscape setting where nature’s physical complexity was greatest and where it was therefore most saturated with life’s ethereal spirit.<sup>23</sup>

As romanticism was a reaction against rationalism, Condon presents radical romanticism as a reaction against modernism and post-structuralism. In particular, Condon cites the inability of modernism and post-structuralism to provide “one conceptual structure in the face of the contemporary deluge of words and symbols.”<sup>24</sup> Condon attaches the term radical to romantic to denote “heightened political and ethical content.”<sup>25</sup> Condon asserts that landscapes *can* convey “true” “universal” meanings and that these meanings can be uncovered by the senses. Condon considers both radical romanticism and post-structuralism to be avant-garde. However, he criticizes post-structuralism for rejecting modernist ideas of truth and universal significance but offering no alternative.

Rationalist Modernism’s collapse was due in part to its insistence in maintaining one conceptual structure in the face of the contemporary

deluge of words and symbols. The romantic view, since it is less dependent on language-based rational thought for its insights and consequently more dependant on the sensuous and the physical, can resist and even ignore this semiotic onslaught.<sup>26</sup>

While Condon agrees with the post-structuralists that modernism and rationalism are not the ways to universal significance, he believes that the physical/sensual experience of nature can provide “an understanding of life’s most important phenomena.”<sup>27</sup> To restate, Condon presents radical romanticism as an avant-garde that seeks universal significance and truth through experience of nature. He believes that this approach carries forward from romanticism, and acts against post-structuralism. Within this model landscape, earth and nature are interchangeable, or the distinction is not important. Condon sees the role of the designed landscape as creating a physical setting for the radically romantic epiphany or a device for expressing radically romantic ideas about universal significance and truth. Condon argues that sensual experience of nature can resist the “semiotic onslaught” because sensual experience of nature occurs unmediated by culture. This is how romanticism, for Condon, reaches truth beyond contingencies and why his radical romanticism is superior to post-structuralism.

The conclusion that romanticism was *successful* in reuniting humans with nature through the sensual experience is problematic, especially within a reading of one of Condon’s main sources, Manfredo Tafuri (1987). While Condon and Tafuri agree that romanticism had as its goal a “reunification of the entire linguistic experience of mankind,” only Condon asserts that such a reunification is possible. Tafuri describes the impossibility of the romantic aspiration as fed by the subconscious recognition “of the *relativity* (emphasis his) of languages and customs.”<sup>28</sup> Tafuri argues that romanticism was saturated with references to a specific set of cultural ideas understood only by the aristocratic owners of the great estates designed according to the romanticist aesthetic.

Condon presents a set of projects as examples of radical romanticism and post-structuralism in landscape architecture. For Condon, Bernard Tschumi’s Parc de la

Villette is emblematic of the post-structuralist avant-garde and the work of Robert Smithson, Gary Dwyer and Michael Van Valkenburgh represent the radically romantic avant-garde. Condon chooses the following quotation from Tschumi as emblematic of Tschumi's post-structuralist attitude. Tschumi states, "there is no absolute "truth" to the architectural project, for whatever "meaning" it may have is a function of interpretation: it is not resident in the object, or in the object's materials."<sup>29</sup> Tschumi's assertion is antithetical to Condon's theory of radical romanticism. If there is no resident meaning within spaces (semiotic, sensual or otherwise) than there is nothing there that can offer a universally true link between humans and their environments. Tschumi not only calls into question semiotic meaning, but also the sensual meaning of places. Condon criticizes post-structuralists like Tschumi for offering only "more alienation and ennui"<sup>30</sup> in the face of the problems of language's shifting meanings. Radical romanticism says Condon, is superior in that it presents, "the possibility of universally applicable synthesis, of the possibility for meaningful artistic "truth" in a relativistic and pluralistic world."<sup>31</sup> Condon deems the sensual realm as salvageable by art.

Dominant cultural institutions seek to appropriate this sensual realm for their own ends but are only partly successful. Artistic production that reveals and heightens these material experiences for the public can undermine this insidious appropriation and retake the terrain of material experience. This aesthetic retaking has a radical ideological motive and is therefore avant-garde: it forcefully resists the manipulative thrust of culture's principal institutions.<sup>32</sup>

The question remains whether or not radically romantic inspired "truth" can be found in the sensual experience of humans in the landscape. Furthermore, what "truths" does Condon believe this experience reveals? Condon explores these ideas through Gary Dwyer's project, "Sacrifice". "Dwyer's work also consciously seeks to take back the terrain of material experience from the onslaught of signs and symbols

that threaten to overwhelm it.”<sup>33</sup> In “Sacrifice,” Dwyer took a tree, painted it and then cut it down. Condon describes the importance of the ritual and act:

In this work the dialectical interdependence between the ethereal mind and the material world, as manifest in experience, is shockingly expressed (the tree was killed, a literal sacrifice). By focusing on the removal of a tree, something that goes unnoticed and for the most part unlamented in the modern world, the horrible necessity to kill living things so that human life can endure must be confronted head on. The sublime horror of the act requires a beautiful ritual to purge our conscience; the work is consequently both horrible and beautiful in the manner of the original Picturesque.<sup>34</sup>

Condon’s description of “Sacrifice” is brief but raises questions about its avant-garde qualities. Firstly, the work is *saturated* by cultural and semiotic elements. Dwyer applies the religious concept of sacrifice, and of conscious purging ritual to a natural object and a human action. Should the act of conscious purging after cutting down a tree, something that Condon and Dwyer see as emblematic of a general world ecological crisis, be possible? Can this project be considered radically romantic when it is based on a cultural action applied to the landscape? Can it be considered radical when it creates a method for clearing our conscious after an act that it sees as representing environmental destruction?

Condon presents a second piece by Dwyer that raises similar questions. In “Mea Culpa,” Dwyer proposes to paint huge white lines along the San Andreas Fault so that as the earth shifts, the lines will change shape. The lines are based on the Celtic writing system and are formed by short lines that cross a main stem. “The shifting earth would then rewrite the ‘words,’ allowing the earth to ‘speak’ in a language that we, as humans, might understand.” Condon quotes Dwyer as saying “I know the earth moves. I want it to speak.”<sup>35</sup> Condon sees this project as a way out of the poststructuralist’s trap. “[T]his device allowed the work to back out of being ‘trapped in the chain of signifiers’ (Schulte-Sasse 1984, p. xxi), a trap that Poststructuralists see no way out of:



backwards in time to the birth of language itself.”<sup>36</sup> Condon states, “This work is aimed at breaking through the cultural noise that passes for reality so that we can truly hear ‘the thunder of the universe.’”<sup>37</sup>

Like “Sacrifice,” “Mea Culpa” seems to be an anthropological projection rather than an a-semiotic discourse between humans and the landscape. Aside from the metaphor of the land sensually creating wordless words through movement, it is difficult to understand how this project saves humans from the angst of post-structuralism. Dwyer projects not only the power of language to the fault line, but a feminine persona, “I want [the earth] to speak, but I must go to her.”<sup>38</sup> The method of visually amplifying shifts in the earth’s crust by marking the motion with painted lines may qualify as cross culturally legible and be, as Condon argues, precursor to radical romanticism. It could be argued that Mea Culpa, despite its culturally specific title, is more successful as a radically romantic work than Sacrifice.

Condon’s criticism of post-structuralism, that it offers nothing other than opening up a rupture in discourse, seems as vague as what Condon supposes people will do with their senses once radical romanticism has freed them from the “dominant cultural institution” that has usurped them. To what, we must ask, is Condon’s radical romanticism waking us up? Condon’s avant-garde of radical romanticism seems to have more to do with Poggioli’s conception of the avant-garde than Bürger’s, even though Condon seems to be using the introduction to Bürger’s work by Schulte-Sasse for much of his theoretical basis.

Neckar and Condon both presuppose that by coming in contact with nature, through the sublime or through radical romanticism, humans can have a connection to nature that is not mitigated in any way by culture. The difference is that, for Neckar, the avant-gardist work is too culturally laden to effect this connection, whereas Condon sees the ability of an avant-gardist work to work *against* the status quo as important.

Radical Romanticism...while cognizant of the problem of interpretation and representation intrinsic to language, breaks free of despair through a



rediscovery of a category of experience that is truly substantial: human relations with the earth itself. Through articulate, powerful, and numerous creative efforts grounded in this romantic ethic, a Radically Romantic avant-garde of the landscape can hold this threatened terrain of material landscape experience and fill that void with Nature's immense light.<sup>39</sup>

### **“Avant-garde and Status Quo”**

The third article of the special issue, written by Garrett Eckbo, begins with a premise that seems an opposite to that used by Neckar. Neckar argued that a landscape in which culture dominated nature was of less value than a landscape in which nature dominated culture. In the abstract to “Avant-garde and Status Quo Landscapes: How Do They Relate?”<sup>40</sup> Eckbo states:

The lasting meanings in landscape are not intrinsic to it; they are given to it by human interpretation or process. The landscape is the arena within which avant-garde concepts emerge, develop, and have an impact upon development. History is a record of competitive interaction between status quo and avant-garde forces.<sup>41</sup>

However, Eckbo's definition of avant-garde is diffuse:

Landscape is continuous in space and time. It is worldwide, and it includes what was and what will be. Nature is process, landscape is product. Avant-garde is both or either at given times...The avant-garde has symbolized all of these technico-civilized-exploitative advances, from pre-Renaissance expressions of authoritarian rule to expanding free-market consumerism.<sup>42</sup>

Eckbo describes further the relationship between nature and the avant-garde as “Nature is ecological process, avant-garde is cultural process. We need to bring them together, the richness of each.”<sup>43</sup> In these quotations we can note differences in Eckbo's

characterization of nature, culture, avant-garde, and the relationships among them from the characterizations of Condon and Neckar. Both rejected the concept that culture in and of itself offered opportunities for understanding our relationship with landscape because, in a multicultural world, cultural messages are not as meaningful as primary contact with nature. Both saw the importance of the avant-garde in its ability to reconnect humans with nature through heightened physical experience. Avant-garde design would work to amplify and expose sensual experience of nature. Condon argued that universal “truths” could be established through physical experience of the landscape itself. Condon argued that by re-establishing this non-semiotic relationship humans would see the error of their ways and work to protect the environment. However both Condon and Neckar saw the role of the avant-garde in the landscape as a way of heightening this visceral experience.

Eckbo sees culture, not as a concealer of the landscape or a barrier to experience, but as being part of an inextricable relationship with the landscape: “Landscape is the constantly developing product of the interaction of nature and society. Culture, particularly avant-garde, is the ongoing expression of that product in its most meaningful forms and terms.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Eckbo points out that the term landscape has little to do with what we often consider nature: “We have outgrown old-fashioned distinctions between natural and unnatural or human landscapes. The entire surface, subsurface, and super surface of the world have now been modified by people, chemically and microscopically if not visually.”<sup>45</sup>

Eckbo calls for the development of a new “marriage;” one between an avant-gardist “inspiration” and “environmental defence and reconstruction.” Eckbo sees the avant-garde as a kind of mechanism for changing existing establishments.

Modern art and design are seen as subversive, post-modern as coercive.

Avant-garde creation must reconcile subversive change in the context of social-technical-economic forces and coercive<sup>c</sup> resistance by

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<sup>c</sup> Eckbo describes the difference between subversion and coercion as: “Subversion destabilizes conventions through original revolutionary departures. Coercion endeavors to stabilize and protect

establishments. Reconciliation is essential to the survival of both people and nature, avant-garde and landscape.<sup>46</sup>

Eckbo sees the landscape as the site on which an ongoing cultural struggle takes place. Again, for Eckbo, nature and culture are allies in a war against the control of the status quo:

The conflict between the inertia of established conventional structure and procedures on the one hand and the natural forces of cultural, technologic, and ecological growth on the other produces a cycle of efforts by the status quo to contain those forces within acceptable forms, and accelerated responses from the avant-garde forces for change... The status quo wants to maintain existing landscape forms and meanings as permanent memorials to a past and now unchanging history. The avant-garde wants to adjust the landscape to reflect the current state of culture as an expression of relations between society and nature.<sup>47</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Eckbo believes that the avant-garde has the potential for challenging status-quo resistance to an ecological approach: "Avant-garde design now has the potential for solving the problem of human-social survival through integration with the world ecosystemic structure of nature. Status quo resistance to this is embodied in all those forces that do not want to change their ways and persist in their belief that humans are the masters of nature."<sup>48</sup> To restate, Eckbo feels that avant-garde landscape design can work against the status quo by expressing messages through the landscape that challenge the current state of culture. This is very different from Condon. Condon sees the role of design as amplifying a latent (and inherently positive) character of nature that exists outside of culture. Eckbo sees landscape design as a vehicle for transmitting messages that seek to challenge existing cultural relationships. For Eckbo, the most

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conventions with additional cultural resources, downplaying the need for economic, technological, or cultural change." (Eckbo, 1991: 10)

important and appropriate subject for debate through avant-garde landscapes is the environment.

The avant-garde is the forefront or spearhead of the forces for change. The landscape is the ongoing historical evolutionary setting...for the resolution of the conflict between subversion and coercion, society and nature...Good avant-garde design will express the triumph of human creativity over the social forces that are responsible for the ecological disasters surrounding us.<sup>49</sup>

Eckbo sees part of the strength of the avant-garde as being its creative abilities and its alliance with change: “Creative avant-garde design can save the world if it becomes integrated with creative ecological planning, design, and management and socio-political-economic processes in which people determine their own destiny by participatory democratic processes.”<sup>50</sup>

### **“Picturesque Anticipations of the Avant-Garde in Landscape Architecture”**

Robinson’s article<sup>51</sup> reflects his research interest in the Picturesque rather than in the avant-garde specifically. However, the way in which he characterizes the role of the Beautiful the Sublime and the Picturesque in landscape frames an understanding of the relationship between politics and the landscape, and offers points for comparison between his essay and those of Condon and Neckar.

Robinson presents a reading of the Picturesque and sets his reading in opposition to commonly used definitions. Rather than defining the Picturesque as a strongly codified design approach which seeks to create a static “visual” representation in the landscape based on a pictorial ideal, as seen in Repton’s Red Books for example, Robinson emphasizes the Picturesque of Knight and Price.<sup>d</sup> Both Knight and Price

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<sup>d</sup> Uvedale Price, “An Essay on the Picturesque as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful” (London: J. Robson, 1796).

Richard Payne Knight, “An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste” (London, 1805).



emphasized the relativity and instability of the experience of landscape. “Its principle is not what is seen at any given moment, but what is revealed by a pattern of responses to changing circumstances.”<sup>52</sup> Robinson discusses how this interpretation of the experience of landscape relates to politics. Depending on one’s perspective, nature was either the symbol of freedom or oppression. And just as Knight and Price offered the Picturesque as neither Burke’s beautiful nor his sublime, “Whig political theory located liberty between the extremes of license and tyranny.”<sup>53</sup> This middle ground is freedom. Again, the relationship between freedom and the Picturesque is at once allegorical and direct. Robinson sees the constant play between the poles of tyranny and license, which is indicated by the changing position of freedom, as related to the un-fixable, natural/artificial flux of the Picturesque.

The intertwining of politics and gardens reminds us how much is at stake in making landscape design. The attacks on Price and Knight in the late-18th century stemmed, in part, from the differing political allegiances of their critics. Both west country gentlemen were members of the liberal Whig faction in parliament led by Charles James Fox. It was Fox who drew the ire of his former Whig colleague Edmund Burke for his tolerant response to the revolution in France. Fox firmly believed that the tendency of power to centralize in a systematic despotism required a continuous counter force. His actions to frustrate the tyranny of the English crown, as he saw it, can be aligned with the Picturesque adherence to mixture.<sup>54</sup>

Something that is constantly shifting draws attention to both poles. In the case of the Picturesque, by drawing attention to the landscape as a shifting object, questions about land ownership, in particular, may be raised:

Conservative critics, Tory or Whig, saw its advocacy of liberty, mixture, and roughness as an assault on common decency and propriety. The desire to preserve their economic and social position rushed to protect the public weal.... For him (William Marshall – 1795), and others who



were part of a long-standing pattern of land ownership, the land and their hold on it were stable facts, not circumstantial compositions. To introduce doubt about the appearance of the land and the power that controlled it was a dangerous move.<sup>55</sup>

By occupying this middle ground of questioning and flux, attention was drawn to structures related to coercion and control. The power of the Picturesque was directly related to the impression that the landscape at the time was fixed, a given.

Painting could make use of deception, but the land was the site of 'an open display of facts.' Of course, the facts did not include the unseen structure of ownership, only the retinal facts. The Picturesque, which at first appeared to challenge the existing order of things as seen by the eye because it suggested that those 'facts' could be recomposed, came later to serve as a very effective mode to concentrate on the visual appearance, cultivate the sensory responses, and deflect attention from the connection between them and the unseen economic and social structures. An aesthetic mode that emphasized shifting relationships with the land attracted men who anticipated their rise to an ownership position. But for those who stood to lose when the established order was set in motion, such slippage was threatening.<sup>56</sup>

The role of the Picturesque, then, was to draw attention to the non-fixed, negotiable nature of the landscape. Robinson also discusses the initially contradictory temporal relationship between landscape and the avant-garde. The time frame of landscape appears long if not infinite and that of the avant-garde temporary if not instant. However, Robinson states:

The time frame of sustainability can be short or long. This gradation of compositional intervention from a little to a lot is one of the things that allow landscape design to align itself with both nature and artifice. The possibility of working at both ends of the temporal range brings

landscape into a positive relationship with the variability characteristic of the avant-garde.<sup>57</sup>

Robinson does not present the Picturesque as a form of the avant-garde. Rather, he argues that there are similarities between the two approaches. Both the Picturesque and the avant-garde emphasize change and challenge commonly held assumptions. Both seek to emphasize contingency in structures that have been considered fixed. Both can be viewed as stylistic approaches thus discounting their political character. The Picturesque can become a comforting visual style. The avant-garde can become “the latest thing.”

...[The] Picturesque [was] an eminently consumable style: marketed, sold, and cultivated by a widening middle class desperately striving to mimic their “betters.” In the process, the instability of the point of view was fixed and codified. The entrepreneurs knew that one cannot sell questions; one sells directions.<sup>58</sup>

Comparing Robinson’s article with the first two articles of the issue highlights some of the particular questions relevant to the framing of a definition for avant-garde within landscape architecture. At its most basic level, an understanding of the avant-garde in landscape architecture must begin with a description of the roles of culture, landscape, and the status quo. Each offers different configurations and draws “team lines” along different boundaries, but the players are present in each. For Neckar, the avant-garde in design is too focused on culture. Neckar proposes that landscape architecture should avoid the avant-garde’s positioning of culture over nature. Instead, landscape architecture should aspire to the sublime. To Neckar this means that design should serve to amplify human experience of nature. Condon proposes a new approach to an avant-garde in landscape architecture based on the ideals of romanticism. Radical romanticism for Condon is avant-garde because it seeks to establish a non-culturally determined relationship between humans and the environment. Only Robinson, however, discusses the relationships among landscapes and political and aesthetic discourse.

Another source that addresses this issue, but does not discuss the avant-garde specifically is “*The Aesthetic Dimension of Burke’s Political Thought*,” by Neal Wood. Wood compares Edmund Burke’s<sup>e</sup> aesthetic discourse regarding the Beautiful and the Sublime to Burke’s discourse regarding political systems. According to Wood, the two are directly related. Briefly stated, Wood describes the psychological and social underpinnings of Burke’s Sublime (pain/fear) and Beautiful (pleasure/love) and shows how they relate to the underpinnings of the authoritative/coercive and altruistic/subordinate modes of politics. From an aesthetic standpoint, according to Wood, it appears that Burke favours the more powerful Sublime because of its ability to inspire awe and strength in humans. However, from a social/political standpoint, Burke favours chivalry and harmony that are more related to the Beautiful. This is not to say that Burke feels that the more “Beautiful” aspects of government are more important. The contrary is true. Wood points out that while Burke may himself favour the more Beautiful aspects of politics and social relations, he emphasizes the importance of the awe inspiring authoritative Sublime and its ability to create order and to satisfy human ambition. While a full discussion of how Burke’s writings might relate to experiential qualities of landscape and a politics is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that connections were being made during the Eighteenth Century among the qualities of humanity, landscape and politics. As stated by Robinson, there is little comparison among the avant-garde qualities of the Picturesque, and either Burke’s authoritative/awe inspiring Sublime or his subordinate/compassionate Beautiful.

**“The Public Park as Avant-Garde Landscape Architecture: A Comparative Interpretation of Two Parisian Parks, Parc de la Villette (1983-1990) and Parc des Buttes –Chaumont (1864-1867)”**

The next article, by Elizabeth Meyer, “The Public Park as Avant-Garde Landscape Architecture: A Comparative Interpretation of Two Parisian Parks, Parc de la

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<sup>e</sup> Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* was published in 1757.

Villette (1983-1990) and Parc des Buttes –Chaumont (1864-1867),”<sup>58</sup> will be examined at length in Chapter 4 of this thesis. However, it is important here to summarize her work in relation to the two questions that frame this chapter.

Meyer describes an avant-gardist work as the following: "If a work is to be avant-garde, it must consciously reject the traditions of its genre."<sup>59</sup> Meyer's definition of avant-garde is strongly tied to a temporal interpretation of a discipline in which "innovation," doing something before anyone else has, is favoured. Based on this definition, Meyer argues that Tschumi's Parc de la Villette cannot be considered avant-garde because it explored similar concepts to those explored by Alphand in Parc des Buttes-Chaumont the century before. Both Alphand and Tschumi designed their parks in a set of overlapping layers: pathways, landform, architectural elements, and iconographic messages. According to Meyer, Parc de la Villette was 120 years too late to be avant-garde. Meyer's description of the avant-gardist work is different from each of the definitions posed by articles so far because Meyer deems as avant-gardist projects that are formalistic departures from traditional landscape architecture. While Condon, Neckar, Eckbo, and Paterson have, with varying degrees of plausibility, pointed to the socio-political role of the avant-garde, Meyer's description of Parc des Buttes Chaumont does not address this aspect. The implications of this kind of definition of the avant-garde will be discussed in detail in this thesis. In this section it was necessary to position Meyer's understanding of the avant-garde as compared to others in the special issue.

### **“Fostering the Avant-Garde Within”**

Paterson's article, “Fostering the Avant-Garde Within,”<sup>60</sup> begins with a critique of what the avant-garde “has become.” Paterson asserts that the avant-garde is “dead” because it has lost its interest in and ability to “challenge the meanings adopted by everyday society and beat the purveyors of ‘culture’ into some semblance of being awake and receptive to the joys and realities of authentic existence. Patterson's definition of avant-garde is unspecific. He uses generalizations relating to “awakening,”



“authenticity,” “reconciliation,” and “rediscovery,” as they relate to an even broader set of generalizations about, “human (sic) and nature,” “return to the poetic,” and “rediscovery of the night to give new value to the light.”<sup>61</sup> He sets these ideas out in relation to “the current Postmodern condition” in which “[o]ur earth, struggling to exist, no longer offers refuge, and the wilderness that so often fuelled the spirit of our democracy has all but disappeared. In short, both nature and experience are in ruin. The battle scene has all the makings of a tragedy.”<sup>62</sup>

Patterson seems to define avant-garde in landscape architecture as leadership within the profession itself. In a manner less clearly structured than Eckbo’s, Patterson sets up the avant-garde leadership in landscape architecture against a status quo. “What is needed, therefore, is not a reconciliation between the avant-garde and the landscape, but rather a conscious fostering of the natural “avant-garde like” or leadership tendencies within the whole of the landscape architectural profession.”<sup>63</sup> However, Patterson argues that the status quo can co-opt the avant-garde. “The battle cry calls our attention to these two wars: the battle to restore landscape as a life-giving force and the battle to revive the meaning of experience in and of landscape. Both battles must be fought concurrently. All other battles pale by comparison.”<sup>64</sup>

What issues should an avant-garde in landscape architecture address? Patterson offers a broad shopping list of goals for the avant-garde including the need to: “win the battle to maintain our sense of wonder in the possibilities of existence,”<sup>65</sup> “The garden, after all, serves as the conscious mediator between people and nature and consequently has much to inform,”<sup>66</sup> and “[a] major task for a landscape architectural avant-garde is to explore possibilities for restoring cohesive relationships between people and nature and to give form to relationship.”<sup>67</sup>

While Neckar and Condon describe the need for landscape architecture that amplifies our experience with nature, Patterson mentions that to: “fight the depreciation of both landscape and experience – are really battles, however, that require a functional art – they are design battles.”<sup>68</sup> “These places do not shock or surprise – they delight. They inform us without snobbery, arrogance, or conceit. They invite us in to think, to



feel and to love – not merely to observe. This is, after all, the way we create great gardens.”<sup>69</sup>

### **“Can Floating Seeds Make Deep Forms?”**

In, “Can Floating Seeds Make Deep Forms?” John T. Lyle rejects the concept of the avant-garde and its militant connotations:

Like it or not, a culture does not gain new ground by the same means an army does. Rather, a culture grows and develops more along the lines of natural succession. Seeds grow on older plants and eventually separate themselves and float away. Some are carried long distances on the wind or in the bellies of animals, and a few of those seeds eventually arrive in soil disturbed by an upheaval of some sort. Among those few there may be mutants that carry within them something truly new.<sup>70</sup>

Lyle, like Paterson, uses the term avant-garde to describe a leadership in the discipline that must address the role of humans in nature. “A major task for a landscape architectural avant-garde is to explore possibilities for restoring cohesive relationships between people and nature and to give form to relationship.”<sup>71</sup> The major issue, for Lyle, within the human vs. nature relationship, is environmental degradation and resource depletion.

### **De, In, Re (form) ing Landscape**

Like Paterson, Jacob’s article, “De, In, Re (form) ing Landscape,”<sup>72</sup> describes an avant-garde that has become impotent. However, while Patterson sees a future for an avant-garde of visionary professionals, Jacobs views the avant-garde as a dangerous concept in the landscape. He blames avant-garde design for enabling humans to separate art, nature and society. Jacobs states,

...the cumulative effect of the avant-garde waves of action has been to deform the landscape. By its excessive preoccupation with originality and autonomy, the art of the avant-garde placed the landscape at an objective distance...Assumptions that the landscape was but a featureless plane, an inexhaustible store of living resources, an infinitely resilient support for the growth and development of a "people in a hurry" were perfectly consistent with the aesthetic of the avant-garde and remained ethically unchallenged by a movement that had lost its social and political soul.<sup>73</sup>

Like Eckbo, Condon, and Neckar, Jacob sets up a set of relationships among landscape, culture, and nature. "The landscape is the physical expression that our cultures impart to nature."<sup>74</sup> Within this relationship, Jacobs states that the avant-garde separated itself from the "praxis of life," and "in its aesthetic self-sufficiency alienated [itself also] from the economic, social, and political milieu."<sup>75</sup>

We must now be more forthcoming with respect to our ideas and our ideals. We can articulate criteria against which we offer to evaluate progress in the management and design of the emerging landscapes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century...these might focus on maintaining the integrity of the biosphere, its habitants and inhabitants, on celebrating the specificity and identity of place and thus the sense of belonging, and on increasing the adaptability of our institutions in support of more equitable and sustainable development.<sup>76</sup>

Jacobs develops the idea of equity as relating to distribution of resources, risk, and benefit relative to different groups today in the future. Jacobs characterizes what lies beyond equitability as something that "explore[s] our collective past and the history of the landscape, to seek to imagine our future and the ways that we might achieve a fitting sense of dwelling within that future."<sup>77</sup> But Jacobs does not see a role for the avant-garde in this process. Rather, Jacobs blames the avant-garde and modernism for bringing landscape to its present state of disconnection. He states that the avant-garde is

fundamentally involved in aesthetics: part of the problem rather than its solution. Jacobs description of the avant-garde is the most pessimistic of the articles in the special issue. He offers no reason for salvage of any of its attributes.

### **“Christo, Smithson, Aycock, Heizer: The Avant-Garde and the Landscape as a Metaphor of Sexuality, Life and Mind”**

The basis of Merrill’s piece, “Christo, Smithson, Aycock, Heizer: The Avant-Garde and the Landscape as a Metaphor of Sexuality, Life and Mind,”<sup>78</sup> rests on the understanding that avant-garde and landscape represent a fundamental difference:

I concluded that for me the question of the conference was about the difficulty we human beings have in dealing appropriately with difference. We make a fetish out of it and enlist in the avant-garde, or we make light of it and align ourselves symbolically with the landscape, but we do not easily strike a genuine balance between it and kinship as values, giving each its due and no more...In my view, finding such a balance has also made the work of the four artists of my title at once avant-garde *and* classic, aggressive *and* sustaining, challenging *and* reassuring.<sup>79</sup>

The goal of Merrill’s article was to draw attention to artist and artworks that address the relationship between the avant-garde and landscape. It must be pointed out here that the work is not that of landscape architects, but of land artists. For this reason, it is difficult to answer the question of the role of the avant-garde in landscape architecture. This may be because Merrill is an architectural historian who teaches in an art history department. Merrill does, however, give a particular description of the poles at which landscape and avant-garde sit.

Because my thesis rests on the supposition that the avant-garde and the landscape are complementary (as well as opposite) and therefore coordinate (if not automatically equivalent), I shall also attempt to show how certain landscape designers in presenting projects at the conference

made it clear that they had found their way to very comparable strategies for doing justice both by kinship and difference, and thus to a potential for “reconciliation” with the avant-garde.<sup>80</sup>

Of a definition of avant-garde, Merrill offers the following:

*Avant-garde* alludes fairly specifically to people identifiable by the position and attitude they assume in relation to the rest of us: out in front and on guard. They exhibit the qualities of particles, and we tend to regard them as such, falling in with and thereby strengthening our sense of their apartness and their grittiness.<sup>81</sup>

What is important to this analysis is that Merrill’s categorization of the landscape and the avant-garde rests in an art work’s ability to draw our attention to the relationships between the two, the dialectics between avant-garde and landscape which Merrill sets out and then identifies in the works of the four artists.

### **“Plants as the Medium for Design Expression and the Imperatives of the Avant-Garde”**

In “Plants as the Medium for Design Expression and the Imperatives of the Avant-Garde,”<sup>82</sup> Robertson describes plants in landscape architecture not as design elements, but as design media. His intention is to show that plants, with their complex relationships to time, and control, in particular, can express avant-gardist messages when employed according to these relationships.

Robertson describes the avant-garde as follows:

Avant-garde art startles and unsettles viewers, and, in so doing in its best expressions, forces them to reassess their preconceptions and assumptions about a subject. Avant-garde art strikes to the heart of our values and beliefs. Thus the essential quality of avant-garde art, its imperative, is an immediacy of effect. ...As a result, the need to constantly

invent new techniques for expression is implicit in the requirement of surprise. What, after all, is less surprising than the punch line of an old joke?<sup>83</sup>

And:

The work of the avant-garde in the landscape provokes us into reassessing the ways we use, and the values we place on, the medium of plants. Herein lies the avant-garde's significance to landscape architecture.<sup>84</sup>

It is important to put next to this quotation, one in which Robertson discusses landscape architecture: "the challenge of landscape profession: the manipulation of living plants and landscapes for diverse design purposes."<sup>85</sup> Again, he refers to avant-garde landscape art and its role in drawing attention to aspects of the profession.

We can be sure, however, that if we face the challenge to use the living medium of plants creatively, then bland "trees 'n' turf landscaping" or designs that lead in time to static, geriatric landscapes of overmature trees set in manicured grass will give place to designs that are dynamically interactive with time and in which the value of living plants and human interactions with plants will be celebrated.<sup>86</sup>

What this particular article reveals, in part because of its specific interest in the use of plant material in landscape architecture, is the malleability of the idea of an avant-garde as challenging the particular ways in which landscape architecture deals with internal issues. Robinson employs the term in a similar manner to its employment in the description of projects and designers in the special section of *Landscape Architecture Magazine*. There, designers employed unusual materials in unusual ways to draw attention to this aspect of design. For Robinson, the same kind of avant-gardist approach to the employment of plant material can serve to draw our attention to the dynamic qualities of the medium of plants, vs. their current, static employment in the profession.



## Avant-Gardism and Landscape Architecture

After the single issue of *Landscape Journal* was published, an article titled, “Avant-Gardism and Landscape Architecture,” by Brenda Brown<sup>87</sup>, then assistant editor of *Landscape Journal*, was published. This article is certainly the most ambitious examination of the term avant-garde to have been published in *Landscape Journal*. Brown surveyed several major sources on the avant-garde, including Poggioli and Bürger, and compared these ideas to projects in landscape architecture by Schwartz, Walker, and Hargreaves. Brown’s piece is useful in terms of the number of sources she cites, but, especially given the complexity of each source, the summaries are cursory. For example, Bürger’s work is one of the most referenced pieces on the avant-garde that Brown presents. However, based on the brevity of the description, it is almost impossible to understand the complexity of Bürger’s assertion that the avant-garde is distinct from the modern because of its desire to reconstruct political structures and become part of this new life praxis.

Brown then begins a discussion of how aspects of an avant-garde artist might relate to landscape architecture. Brown makes a distinction between “two-poles” of avant-gardism. She argues that in landscape architecture, there is a tendency to use the avant-gardist label for projects that focus on how a project looks, but that the term is not identified for projects that address the social. However, any further mention of social or political issues and their relationship to the avant-garde within the fine arts is cursory. Perhaps the difficulty with this piece is what it tries to accomplish in such a small amount of words. However, a brief comment on a shortcoming of the application of the label avant-gardist for this work in landscape architecture would have been interesting for elaboration:

It is refreshing that this work exists. Yet it is important to realize that it is this work, most commonly related to ‘art’ or the ‘avant-garde,’ that may most perpetuate the sense of landscape architecture as a commodity and an artifact.<sup>88</sup>

Brown argues that the current use of avant-garde as a label in landscape architecture has focuses on such “New Wave” projects as Harlequin Plaza and the Bagel Garden, and that these works can only be called avant-garde based on the commonly held definition of aesthetically “leading edge.” Brown qualifies this further by adding that “we can call this work avant-garde; however, it is so only in relation to one’s discipline.”<sup>89</sup> Certainly Brown’s analysis of the work in landscape architecture that has been labelled avant-gardist is parallel to the discussions here of the term’s use in *Landscape Architecture Magazine*. That is, that it relates to an avant-garde of “new in one’s field” and that the judgment of a work as avant-garde is based on how the project looks and is spatially organized.

## **A Discourse on Theory II: Three Tyrannies of Contemporary Theory and the Alternative of Hermeneutics**

James Corner’s essay presents the avant-garde as one of three approaches to modern landscape architectural theory that “works to perpetuate an excessively ‘hard’ or neutral world – a world in which culture can no longer figure or recollect itself.”<sup>90</sup> Corner views the avant-garde as a critical approach that seeks “closure, certainty, and control”<sup>91</sup> and groups the avant-garde for this reason with positivism. Corner presents hermeneutics as an alternative theory. “Here, theory is something ever-open, permitting a free association of ideas through the mechanics of situational interpretation and metaphor.”<sup>92</sup>

Corner’s definition of the avant-garde is clearly stated: “The avant-garde... can be characterized as a movement... actively avoiding any affiliation to tradition and convention. Its proponents believe that their work must be constantly made afresh, and they find creative adrenaline in risk, novelty, and polemical experiment.”<sup>93</sup> Corner, like Poggioli, presents the avant-garde as related to modernism. “Art could best fulfil its historical destiny by turning away from tradition and express instead the peculiarities of its own time. To be modern meant to be new, and to be new meant that one had to be original.”<sup>94</sup> Corner’s use of avant-garde in this article most closely relates to Egbert’s

category of art-for-art's-sake. As examples, Corner cites non-representational painters who challenged "the notion that an artwork refer to an idea outside itself."<sup>95</sup> Corner argues that as a result of the avant-gardist approach to landscape architecture we are left with,

built landscapes that often suffer from an equally closed explicitude: a stifling immanence where all is exposed and nothing is left to imagination... Hermeneutics provides the basis for a landscape architectural theory that transcends pictorial image and historical style by critically engaging contemporary circumstance and tradition.<sup>96</sup>

### **Avant-Garde as a Descriptive Label**

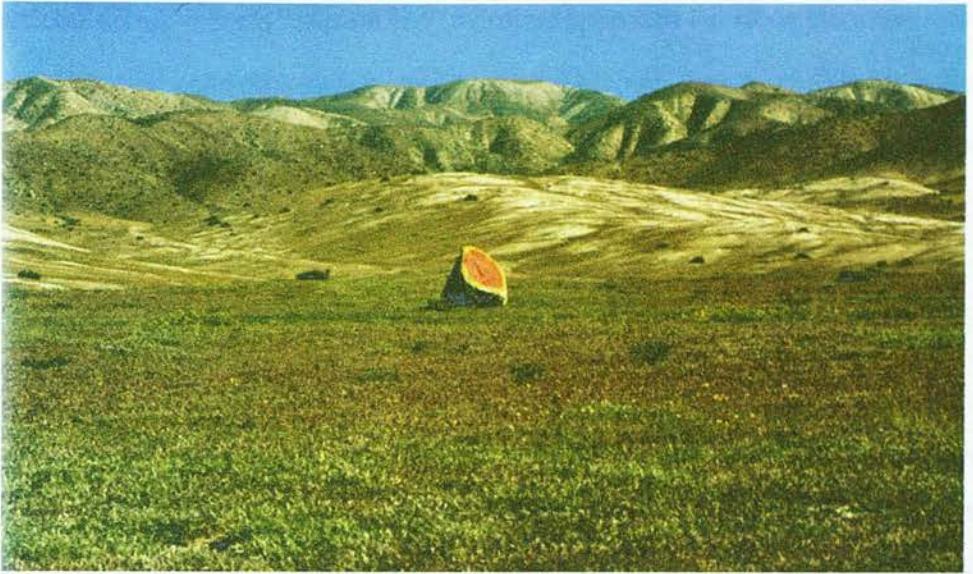
A manual search of the index published by *Landscape Architecture Magazine* that covers the beginning of publication through 1987, contains no category for the term avant-garde. Similarly, an Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals<sup>f</sup> search, which covers 1977 to the present, yields only one article. This article will be discussed later in the chapter and is a description of George Hargreaves' work at Harlequin Plaza in Colorado. However, in 1990, an entire issue of *Landscape Architecture Magazine* was dedicated to the Avant-Garde, but since none of the articles carry the term in their abstracts, or titles, they were only found through a manual search of the publication.

The February 1990 issue of *Landscape Architecture Magazine* includes a design section featuring the work of "Avant-Gardeners." The section introduction includes terms which are consistent with the avant-garde of art-for-art's sake. The first "avant-gardener" presented in the article is Gary Dwyer<sup>97</sup>. Quotations from Dwyer himself and comments by the author, Papier, include descriptors like, "unusual," "experimental," and "cryptic." The idea of an avant-garde artist as set apart from others in their field is very consistent with not only Egbert's conception of the art-for-

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<sup>f</sup> "The Avery Index is the foremost periodicals index for architecture and related disciplines. It indexes over 1,000 periodicals published worldwide covering the subject areas of architecture, architectural design, city planning, historic preservation, history of architecture, interior design and landscape architecture. Updated daily."





**Figure 8.** *Painted Rock*, by Gary Dwyer.

*Painted Rock*, by Gary Dwyer is an example of one of his “primal marks”. Dwyer believes that the role of the designer is to change the site, in this case by painting a rock with bright red and green paint in an otherwise “natural” setting. Dwyer is considered to be an “avant-gardener” because he views himself as at the leading edge of landscape architecture; challenging what he sees as the field’s over-sensitivity to ecological concerns.

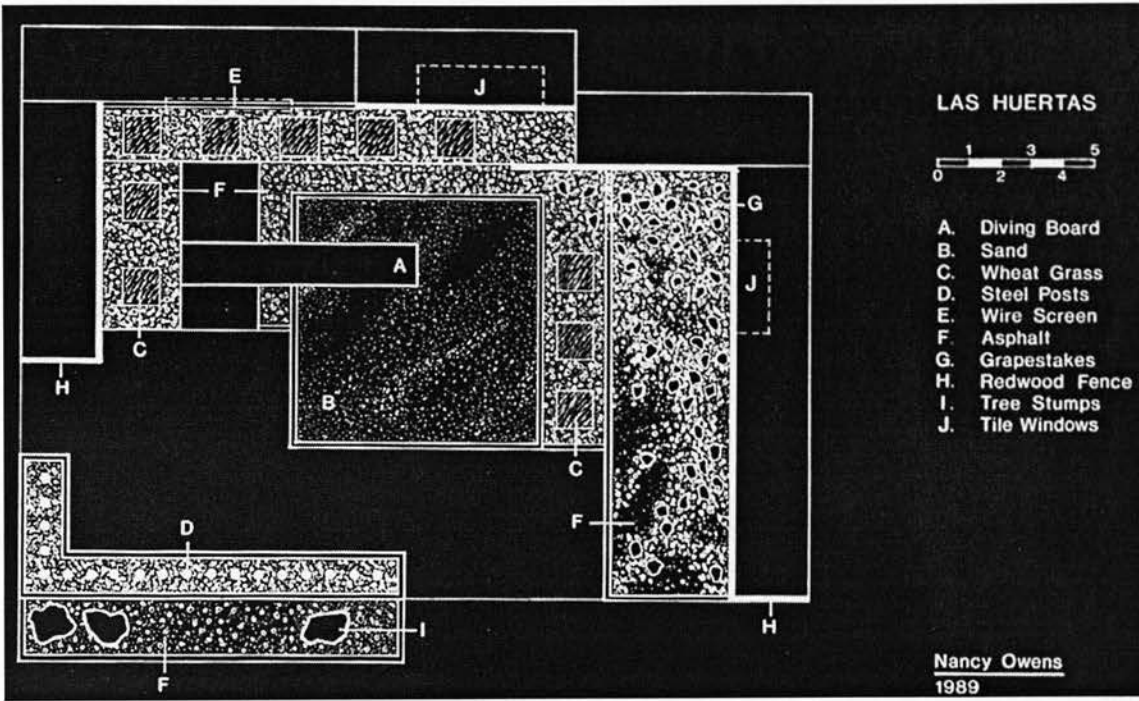
*Deborah Papier, “Carefully Articulated Vandalism,” Landscape Architecture Magazine 80, no. 2 (1990): 73.*



art's sake artist, but also with the popular conception of the avant-garde artists. While these articles do not present ideas on how a critical approach based on the avant-garde could be structured and employed in landscape architecture, they provide information on how the term is used as a critical label. This section is organized according to sets of ideas that emerge in each project discussion.

### **At the Leading Edge**

Dwyer classifies the theory behind his work as a reaction against, “[landscape architecture’s] excessive humility toward nature.”<sup>98</sup> Dwyer believes that this “excessive humility” stifles creative design approaches. In describing himself as a designer and how he sees his role within the profession, Dwyer states: “[S]omeone has to be out there riding up front...landscape architects stumble around the wilderness with their Sierra Club cards...We’ve become so concerned with protecting nature that we forget that the role of the designer is to change.”<sup>99</sup> Again, Dwyer’s impression of himself as somehow working “ahead” of others in his field in order to challenge assumptions within that field regarding the boundaries of its work (in this case in the field’s relationship to ideas surrounding nature and ecology), fits very much the “art-for-art’s sake” model. Papier extends this description to all of the designers in the special section: “avant-gardeners” are “...redrawing the boundaries of the field. They are a disparate group, these avant-gardeners. Some are environmentalists who work with the blessings of conservation organizations. Others seem in the throws of an ecological counter-reaction.”<sup>100</sup> Another interesting characterization of Dwyer as it relates to the conception of the avant-garde of art-for-art’s sake is found in the title of the article, “Carefully Articulated Vandalism.” The combination of the intellectual connotations of “carefully articulated” and the recklessness, lashing-out, almost prankster connotations of vandalism, speak to the “informed renegade” stereotype of the avant-garde artist. An interesting contrast to the contemporary, newest of the new aspect of the avant-garde is the label that Dwyer uses for his projects. He refers to them as “primal marks”. This label and Dwyer’s combining of the primal and the cutting edge seems almost



**Figure 9.** Las Huertas, Nancy Owens. The unusual materials Owens employed in her backyard design, Las Huertas, led to her characterization as an avant-gardener in the special issue of *Landscape Architecture Magazine*. Owen’s design included a swimming pool of red sand and tree stumps covered in white plaster.

Patricia C. Phillips, “Suppressing Nostalgia,” *Landscape Architecture Magazine* 80, no. 2 (1990): 74.

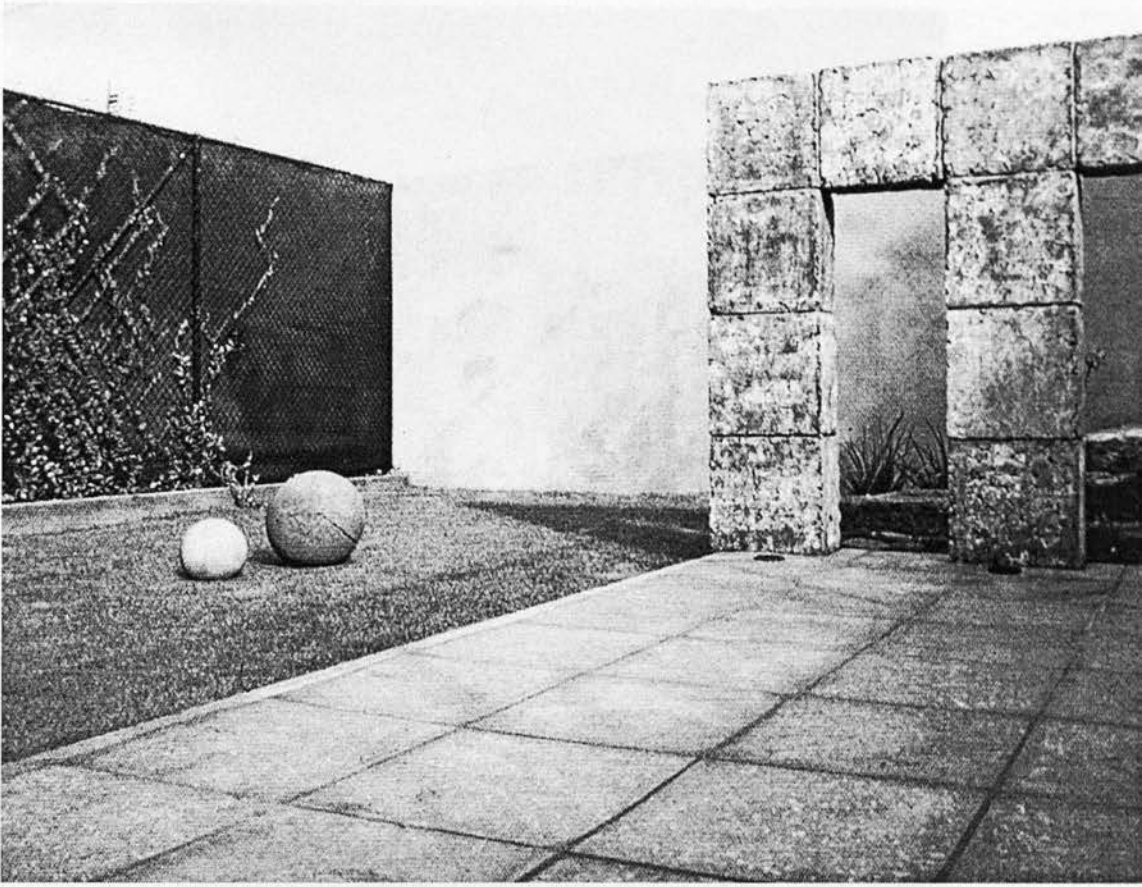
contradictory. But, within the avant-garde of landscape architecture, there is, in particular accounts, a sense of some connection to nature that has existed in the distant past, as being important today: thus making the pairing of influences like that of the Native American and Buddhist possible. How Dwyer's conviction that "We can shoot nature full of arrows, and it will survive," might be reconciled with these two traditions is a separate issue, but this connection will resurface with other examples of the avant-garde within landscape architecture.

### **Challenging Perceived Boundaries Between Landscape Architecture and the Fine Arts**

Within the series of articles in which each "avant-gardener" is described as at the "leading edge" of landscape architecture, a related idea emerges. Each designer is also described as crossing perceived boundaries that lie between landscape architecture and the fine arts. Many were trained in other fields exclusively or in addition to being trained in landscape architecture. Perhaps because of this strong connection between the visual arts and landscape architecture in their work, the projects seem to have a strong, and in some cases, exclusively visual element. Some of the projects are, in fact, not intended to be experienced in a spatial way at all, but through photographs or video recordings (Dwyer, Goldsworthy). Where projects were not entirely visual or could be occupied, it is the visual qualities of the space that set the projects apart as avant-garde. The visual character of the work came from a particular treatment of materials.

#### **Use of materials**

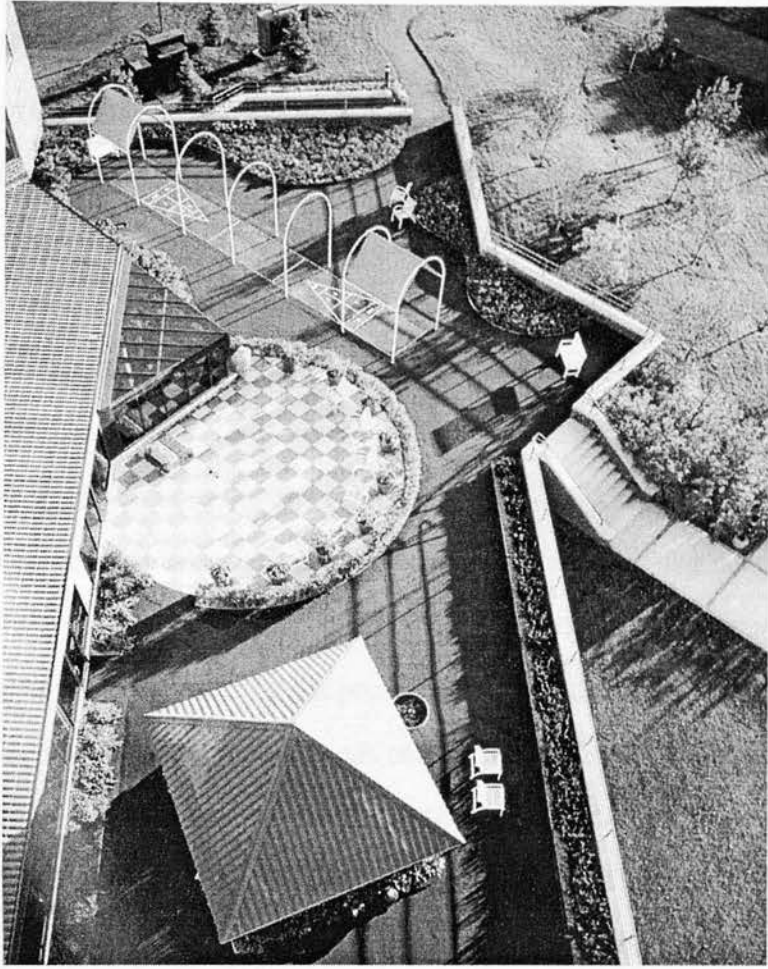
"What they tend to have in common is a background in art as well as landscape architecture, which they view as a species of sculpture. And like today's sculptors, they see graphic potential in the most unlikely materials."<sup>101</sup> This difference in approach to materials employed by the "avant-gardeners" occurs in two (almost opposite) ways. Either the artist uses materials not commonly used in landscape architecture or uses materials that are commonly used, but in uncommon ways. The visual impact of the



**Figure 10.** Pemberton Garden, Topher Delany. Like Owens, Delany was also characterized as avant-garde because of her unusual use of materials. At Pemberton Garden the concrete stairs were dyed mauve and purple, and one yellow and one pink concrete ball sat on the lawn.

*Deborah Papier, "Synthetic Means, Serene End," Landscape Architecture Magazine 80, no. 2 (1990): 76.*



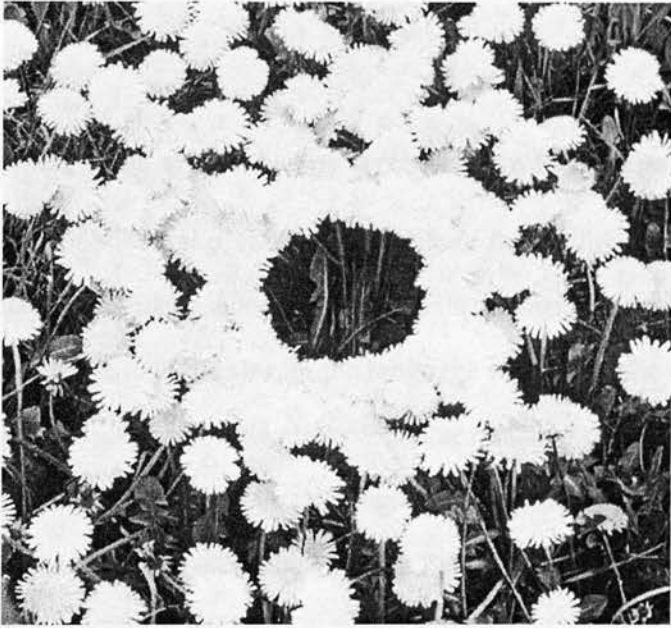
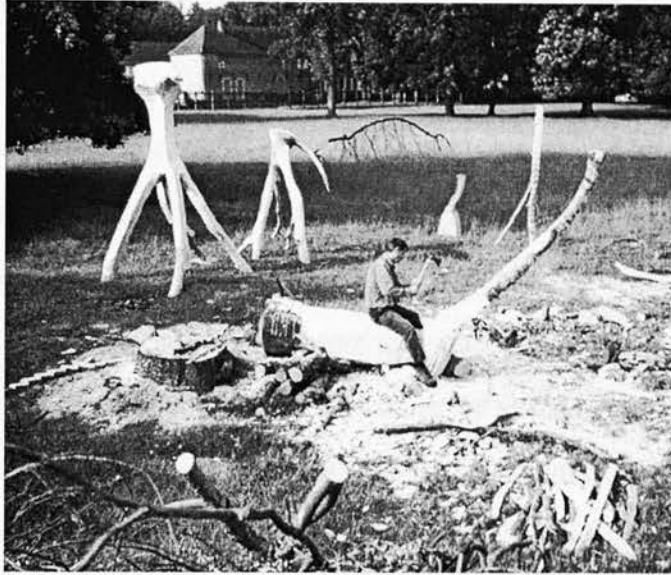


**Figure 11.** St. Therese Care Center, Thomas Oslund.

Oslund's project for the St. Therese Care Center was categorized as avant-gardist because of its bold colors and patterns and references to a vernacular. The site was used as a recreation area for an elderly home. Oslund created a kind of community back-yard based on elements from a typical backyard.

*Deborah Papier, "Making Artifice a Virtue," Landscape Architecture Magazine 80, no. 2 (1990): 77.*

materials or their use factors strongly in the project's categorization as avant-garde. The importance of a different approach to the use of the materials of the landscape architect is presented in the introductory overview of the section: "[w]e see...Owens, Cheryl Barton and Tom Oslund forsaking nature to fashion synthetic indoor gardens. These designers also share an appreciation of the commonplace; the ability to produce art from carpet, spray paint or sycamore leaves."<sup>102</sup> Some of the designs featured materials considered too "industrial," "unnatural," or "massive" to be considered appropriate for use in a built landscape. Nancy Owens, in her "synthetic garden" titled "Las Huertas," displayed as part of the San Francisco Landscape Garden Show, took common garden or landscape materials such as grape stakes, a diving board, and grass, but through the manipulation of their colour, size, and position, "monumentalized these common objects while suppressing the possibility of nostalgia."<sup>103</sup> Topher Delany "employs some very untraditional methods and materials...she is building a wall of pink stucco decorated with costume jewellery. In other gardens, she has used neon, metal and fabrics."<sup>104</sup> Cheryl Barton also employed industrial materials in her design for the 1989 San Francisco Landscape Garden Show, called "Garden on the Edge," including aluminium and neon, and combined them with more traditional materials like strips of sod and goldfish in bowls. Barton states that her interest in the landscape is in, "abstracting the sculptural possibilities...by making what's created look created... We believe that landscape design is more than just the tangible...there has to be a certain poetry to it. There's the physical, but there's also the metaphysical."<sup>105</sup> We find in this quotation the idea that there is something "more" to landscape architecture than is currently addressed and that one way this can be expressed is through the use of materials. Thomas Oslund's projects while being traditional in the sense that they are built spaces in use, approach materials in a way similar to that of Baron and Owens. Described by Papier as work that is "mischievous," Oslund's plans for a rooftop garden and in-door garden include a wide spectrum of references to elements like screened in porches, Astroturf, curvy beds of annuals found in the roof-top garden and parterres, topiary, and axis in the in-door garden designed around an existing miniature



**Figure 12.** David Nash.

**Figure 13.** Ring of Dandelions, Andy Goldsworthy. Neither Nash, nor Goldsworthy are landscape architects or designers. However, both were included in this issue on “avant-gardeners” because they used natural materials in their sculptural projects. Both were said to change the way the viewer looked at natural elements.

*Stephen Gardiner, “Their Medium is Nature,” Landscape Architecture Magazine 80, no. 2 (1990): 80-82.*

Arch d' Triumph. Users are said to be able to “subvert” the space by moving pink carpeted topiary pyramids.<sup>§</sup>

Of all the “avant-gardeners” presented in the issue, David Nash and Andy Goldsworthy seem, at first, the most closely related to one another in particular because both employ materials taken directly from nature. Certainly, Goldsworthy was a pupil of Nash. But while Goldsworthy’s projects seem to be all about creating pattern, and are, therefore, incredibly photogenic, one can only sense the motion Nash is able to convey in his sculptural pieces. However, neither is a landscape architect or designer. Why they have been chosen as representatives of the avant-garde of landscape architecture is uncertain.

### **Summary of Special Issue of Landscape Architecture Magazine**

Certainly the publication of this special issue of the leading trade journal in landscape architecture provides evidence of the field’s interest in exploring the avant-garde. As discussed, these explorations, in the language employed, the criteria applied, and the projects chosen for study, indicate a particular meaning cluster. The articles placed an emphasis on works which: test the meaning of landscape architecture vs. the meaning of visual art; challenge other ideas within the field such as a perceived reverence for nature; employ materials in uncommon ways; and are, for these reasons and others, perceived to be at the “cutting-edge” of design. All of these related most closely to the definition of the avant-garde of the art-for-art’s-sake mode. Similar criteria for the avant-garde were found in an additional article in *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, published after the special edition. This article will be described in the following section.

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<sup>§</sup> Certainly the term “subvert” has strongly political connotations. It is interesting that here it refers to an intentionally comic design element.



## Other References to Avant-garde Work in *Landscape Architecture Magazine*

After the 1990 special issue on the avant-garde, there is only one article that contains the term within its title or abstract.<sup>106</sup> The 1999 article is titled:

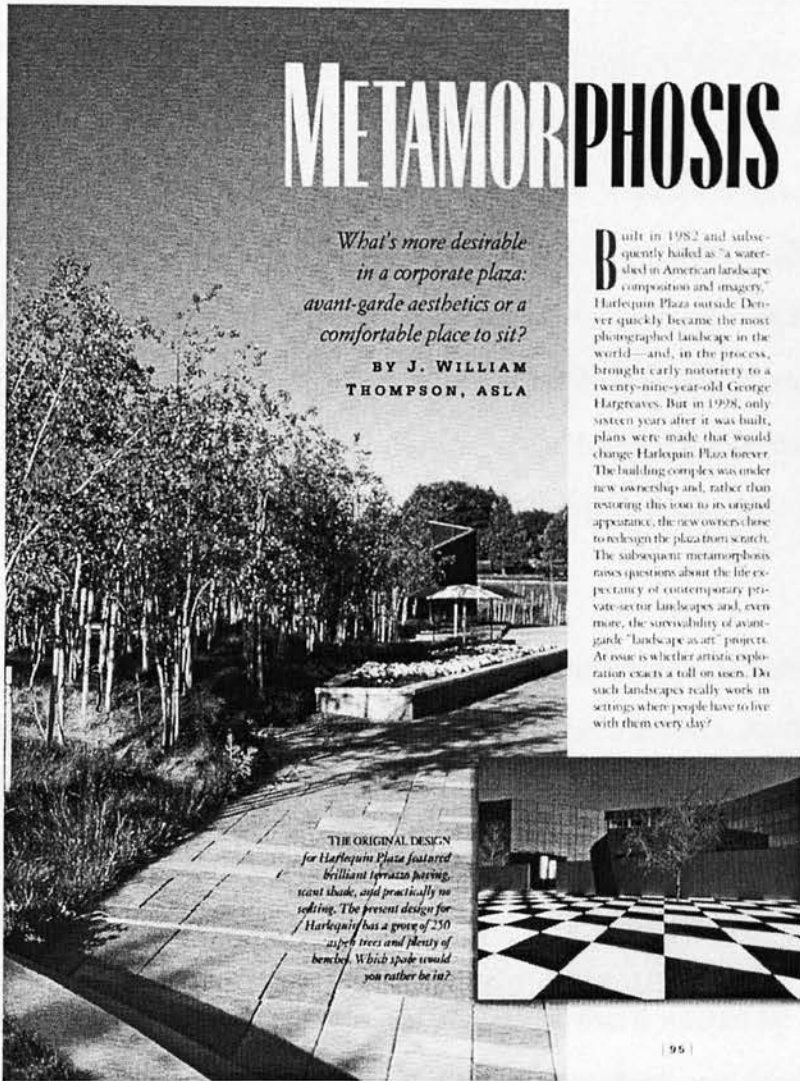
“Metamorphosis: What's more desirable in a corporate plaza, avant-garde aesthetics or a place to sit?” The article describes Harlequin Plaza, originally designed in 1982 by George Hargreaves and considered to be an example of an avant-gardist approach to design. The article compares Hargreaves’ original design to the site’s redesign by EDAW.<sup>h</sup> The main question of the article is whether the original, more “artistic,” less “functional” space was more successful than the new, “less avant-garde,” more functional space.

Built in 1982 and subsequently hailed as a “watershed in American landscape composition and imagery,” Harlequin Plaza outside Denver quickly became the most photographed landscape in the world – and, in the process, brought early notoriety to a twenty-nine-year-old George Hargreaves... The subsequent metamorphosis raises questions about the life expectancy of contemporary private-sector landscapes and, even more, the survivability of avant-garde “landscape as art” projects. At issue is whether artistic exploration exacts a toll on users. Do such landscapes really work in settings where people have to live with them every day?<sup>107</sup>

The original Hargreaves design was accorded its avant-garde status on primarily visual terms. This emphasis on the visual is similar to the description of the work of the “avant-gardeners” of the special issue. Hargreaves did not envision his design, commissioned as an outdoor space above a parking garage of a corporate headquarters, as an occupiable landscape at all. Rather, Hargreaves developed the space as a kind of art piece to be viewed and passed-through. This approach to landscape architecture, where

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<sup>h</sup> EDAW is a large landscape architecture firm.



**Figure 14.** Excerpt from Landscape Architecture Magazine article on Harlequin Plaza.

In this article, Thompson compares George Hargreaves Harlequin Plaza (pictured lower right) with EDAW's redesign of the same space (larger image). Hargreaves' plaza was said to have challenged the idea of the corporate plaza. The strong patterns Hargreaves created were influenced by perspective tricks of the visual arts. It was seen as functioning more like a visual artwork and less like a landscape and was, therefore, avant-garde. EDAW's design was not characterized as avant-gardist because it used traditional materials and served a traditional function.

*William J. Thompson, "Metamorphosis: What's more desirable in a corporate plaza, avant-garde aesthetics or a place to sit?" Landscape Architecture Magazine 89, no. 9 (1999): 94.*

built work need not be “used” in the traditional sense, as a place for relaxation, pleasant movement from place to place, etc., forms the basis of the arguments of the article. In order to emphasize his design goals for the site, Hargreaves made several design moves, which made traditional uses of the site largely impossible, or at least unpleasant. “Nevertheless, Harlequin became a popular setting for photographing wedding parties and the like. For Hargreaves, this validated his omitting shade and seating from the plaza. As he wrote in *Landscape Architecture* (July 1983), “That this plaza draws art groups for public performance and uses, sightseers, and weekend picnickers is contrary to the dogmatic notion that users of landscapes must sit down in the shade and eat lunch.”<sup>108</sup>

Like the work of the “avant-gardeners” Hargreaves employed non-traditional materials and patterning and consciously rejected traditional elements. Again, the elements most obviously missing were vegetation and seating. Instead, Hargreaves, again like the avant-gardeners, developed the spaces as pieces of visual art and experimented with ideas of perspective.

Anyone who experienced the original plaza knew that it worked by visually launching itself at spectators, attempting to shock and disorient them from their normal routines. The original design did not possess beauty in a Picturesque sense but beauty as opening the possibilities of seeing the world from fresh perspectives, new angles, and unforeseen avenues.<sup>109</sup>

Hargreaves’ design was not long lived. In time, the materials failed to stand up to the conditions and the space needed to be redeveloped.<sup>110</sup> EDAW received the commission and took a very different approach to the design. Where Hargreaves’ piece was developed as a place to view and not to use, and certainly prevented the space being used by the harsh, exposed climate it created and the absence of furnishings, EDAW sought to mitigate the environment to create a more traditional landscape that served more traditional uses.

For better or worse, the new design tries to comfort and embrace the users, not awaken them. For example, the expansive, minimal central space of the original plaza has been replaced by an aspen grove that fills the space and reduces glare from adjacent buildings. While the new design erases much of the shock, it replaces it with a friendly and more comfortable setting for lunch-goers. The conflicts that the original design thoughtfully sought to make transparent have solidified into an opaque suburban office park setting.<sup>111</sup>

This description of the designer and the work, shows strong parallels to the art-for-art's sake avant-garde. Like the artists/designers in the single issue, Hargreaves sought to challenge the boundaries of landscape architecture by developing a place that was more about visual challenge than occupation and was more a work of visual art than of landscape architecture. Where EDAW sought to create a space that was usable in the traditional sense of the term, by providing shelter from the elements, seating, and vegetation, Hargreaves sought to challenge one's visual perception using strong patterning and stark contrasts.

In summary, each of the articles from *Landscape Architecture Magazine* discussed in this section present designs and designers as avant-garde who challenge certain traditional elements of landscape architecture. Often, this challenge, regardless of the aspect of landscape architecture that it is levied against, occurs using visual or formal means. Dwyer challenged the ecological approaches of landscape architects with visual "primal marks," Owens' *Las Huertes*, "was a template where the whimsical, the absurd and the invented were plausibly related"<sup>112</sup> through an atypical treatment of typical garden elements, and Hargreaves challenged presumptions about the "use" of landscape architectural space by developing a space that was useful only in its ability to draw our attention to preconceptions about perspective and vision. These represent challenges of a particular field's boundaries and have no explicit political content and present no explicit political stance. As mentioned earlier, the definitions of avant-garde employed in the single issue of *Landscape Journal* offer much less parallel results.



## Summary and Conclusions

The goal of this chapter was to develop an overview of the usage of the term avant-garde within the field of landscape architecture. First it was asked: Is the term avant-garde employed in the development of a political criticism as proposed in this thesis? Second it was asked: How is avant-garde employed as a label in judging landscape architectural designs? A difference was found in the definitions of avant-garde employed and the manner in which they are used in articles written for *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, vs. the *Landscape Journal*. In the former, we find an employment of avant-garde that deals mainly with formalistic descriptions comparing how “avant-gardist” projects “look,” versus how more traditional examples of landscape architecture “look.” The goal of the articles seemed to be less of an investigation into the meaning and mechanics of the avant-garde in landscape architecture, and more about using the avant-garde as a label that served to bind a discussion of a particular set of designers together. The emphasis on how a project looked directed much of the descriptions. For this reason there is an emphasis on materials, colour, and organization. While the designers were credited with being at the cutting edge of the discipline, this label seemed to have more to do with their unusual approach to materials than any other factor. There was a noted absence of discussion regarding politics and design. Returning to the research questions set out at the beginning of this study, it was found that the definition employed in the special section of *Landscape Architecture Magazine* related strongly to the idea of an avant-garde of art for art’s sake, where the important question was whether or not a project presented an aesthetic challenge to its field. It was also significant in each of these articles that the designer in some way could be compared to a fine artist. Each was either trained in fine arts or the work they developed had “sculptural” or strongly visual qualities that could be compared to a work of fine art. The relationship between public art and landscape architecture will be introduced in Chapter 3, but in the context of public space and politics. But the ongoing overlaps and crossings of landscape architecture and the fine arts is important to point out here.

Within *Landscape Journal*, the criteria for judging a work as avant-gardist are not necessarily tied to its visual characteristics. Generally, the articles in *Landscape Journal* presented a wider spectrum of usage. This difference is not surprising. *Landscape Architecture Magazine* is a much more visually and design oriented publication in terms of its content and format, while the *Landscape Journal* is considered to be a more “scholarly” publication and is printed in a black-and-white format, making reliance on the visual difficult. Furthermore, while the majority of articles presented in both publications stem from a single issue dedicated to the avant-garde, in *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, each article is focused on one particular designer and his or her work. The section title was “Avant-Gardeners” indicating the approach as one more interested in individuals and projects rather than broader conceptualisations of how the avant-garde is defined. In *Landscape Journal*, each article instead focuses on a proposed theoretical framework for the avant-garde, placing a greater emphasis on defining the term rather than describing a particular designer. Even so, it was found that within the special issue of *Landscape Journal*, while more time was perhaps devoted to the discussion of what constitutes an avant-garde, it was often very difficult to distil a definition from the individual articles. However, as discussed earlier, it is significant that the goals both for the conference on the avant-garde held at University of Minnesota and the special issue of the *Landscape Journal* had to do with the development of a critical and theoretical approach to the avant-garde, rather than simply the employment of avant-garde as a descriptive label. That is not to say that the definitions distilled here from the *Landscape Journal* articles related to the political rather than art-for-art’s sake definition of the avant-garde set out at the beginning of this chapter. The only article that approached a political connotation of the avant-garde in a more than passing fashion was the article on the Picturesque by Robinson (himself an historian rather than a landscape architect). In it Robinson pointed out that the Picturesque challenged the idea of incontestable landownership in Britain. However, none of the articles set out the idea that the avant-garde as a critical tool could expose the implicit and explicit politics of landscape architecture and public space.

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<sup>1</sup> *Landscape Architecture Magazine* 80, no. 2 (1990).

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- <sup>2</sup> Lance Neckar, "Two Near Voids," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Neckar, 1.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, 2.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, 1.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, 1.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> <http://www.hargreaves.com/projects/candlestick/index.html>. June 2001.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 2.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 1
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 1-2.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 2.
- <sup>21</sup> Patrick M. Condon, "Radical Romanticism," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 3.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, 4.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, trans. Pellegrino d'Acierno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987), 39.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 8
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibis.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid, 7.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid, 8.
- <sup>38</sup> Dwyer photocopy, page 15.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, 8.
- <sup>40</sup> Garrett Eckbo, "Avant-Garde and Status Quo Landscapes: How Do They Relate?" *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991) 9-11.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 10.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 10.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 11.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., 10-11.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., 11.
- <sup>51</sup> Sidney K. Robinson, "Picturesque Anticipations of the Avant-Garde and the Landscape," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 12-15.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., 13.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>59</sup> Elizabeth K. Meyer, "The Public Park as Avant-Garde (Landscape) Architecture: A Comparative Interpretation of Two Parisian Parks, Parc de la Villette (1983-1990) and Parc des Buttes-Chaumont (1864-1867)," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 16-26.

- <sup>60</sup> Douglas D. Paterson, "Fostering the Avant-Garde Within," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 27-36.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>67</sup> John T. Lyle, "Can Floating Seeds Make Deep Forms?" *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 44.
- <sup>68</sup> Paterson, 33.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.
- <sup>70</sup> Lyle, 37.
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.
- <sup>72</sup> Peter Jacobs, "De, In, Re (form) ing Landscape," *Landscape Journal* 10, no.1 (1991): 48-56.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.
- <sup>78</sup> David Merrill, "Christo, Smithson, Aycock, Heizer: "The Avant-Garde and the Landscape" as a Metaphor of Sexuality, Life, and Mind," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 57-67.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.
- <sup>82</sup> Ian M. Robertson, "Plants as a Medium for Design Expression and the Imperatives of the Avant-Garde," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 68-73.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>87</sup> Brenda Brown, "Avant-Gardism and Landscape Architecture," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 2 (1991):134-153.
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*,152.
- <sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.
- <sup>90</sup> James Corner, "Discourse on Theory II," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 2 (1991): 115-133.
- <sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.
- <sup>97</sup> Deborah Papier, "Carefully Articulated Vandalism," *Landscape Architecture Magazine* 80, no. 2 (1990): 72-73.
- <sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.
- <sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>100</sup> Deborah Papier, "Avant-Gardeners," *Landscape Architecture Magazine* 80, no. 2 (1990): 70.
- <sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>103</sup> Patricia C. Phillips, "Suppressing Nostalgia," *Landscape Architecture Magazine* 80, no. 2 (1990): 74.
- <sup>104</sup> Deborah Papier, "Synthetic Means, Serene End," *Landscape Architecture Magazine* 80, no. 2 (1990): 76.
- <sup>105</sup> Deborah Papier, "Making Artifice a Virtue," *Landscape Architecture Magazine* 80, no. 2 (1990): 77.
- <sup>106</sup> William J. Thompson, "Metamorphosis: What's more desirable in a corporate plaza, avant-garde aesthetics or a place to sit?" *Landscape Architecture Magazine* 89, no. 9 (1999): 94-101, 116-118.
- <sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.
- <sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.
- <sup>109</sup> Alan Berger, "Perspectives," *Landscape Architecture Magazine*
- <sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.
- <sup>111</sup> Berger,
- <sup>112</sup> Phillips, 74.



## CHAPTER 3: CASE STUDIES OF CRITICAL WORKS

The city and the urban sphere are thus the setting of the struggle; they are also, however, the stakes of that struggle.<sup>1</sup>

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, theory and criticism shape what is possible in practice. Theory and criticism inscribe and challenge the boundaries of a discipline. Landscape architectural theory and criticism demarcate where, when, for whom, how and towards what end, professionals alter the physical landscape. This chapter examines two critical works as case studies. Each critical work emphasizes different impacts of changes in the urban landscape. Each values or devalues different aspects of design. The case studies are, however, different in the context of the avant-garde. The first writer uses the term avant-garde as a critical tool for expressing what that critic sees as important to landscape architecture. The second writer does not use the term avant-garde at all in her analysis. How then, does this piece relate to the overall study? While it does not specifically address the concept of the avant-garde in landscape architecture, it does address the primacy of social and political issues in design of public space.

In “The Public Park as Avant-Garde (Landscape) Architecture: A Comparative Interpretation of Two Parisian Parks, Parc de la Villette (1983-1990) and Parc des Buttes-Chaumont (1864-1867),” Elizabeth Meyer begins with a particular definition of avant-garde. She then uses that definition to judge the relative “importance” and “stature” of the two projects in landscape architectural history. Meyer’s article sheds light on how the term avant-garde is used as a critical tool, and what this design critic/historian values about the avant-garde in landscape architecture. The article was published in *Landscape Journal*, the only academic/theoretical journal in the field of landscape architecture in North America. The author is one of the leading historian/critic/theorists who also served as Chair of one of the most prestigious graduate departments, University of Virginia, and, as compared to other historian/critics in the field, has been widely published. The subject of the critical work, Paris during the

reign of Napoleon III represents one of the periods in history when politics and the development of public space were most broadly and clearly related.

The second critical work examined in this chapter is by Rosalyn Deutsche, an art historian and critic. In *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Rosalyn Deutsche presents a series of essays which question the relationships between politics and public space. Like Meyer, Deutsche is both writer and academic, who taught at Harvard, MIT, Cooper Union, Queens College, City University of New York, and Rutgers. The critical work chosen as a case for this chapter was “*Tilted Arc* and the Uses of Democracy.” This article describes the events and issues surrounding the removal of Richard Serra’s sculpture from Federal Plaza in New York City.<sup>a</sup> This article was chosen because it deals directly with issues of public space and politics and will help to draw further attention to the relationships between the work of landscape architects and politics. This critical piece does not employ the concept avant-garde in evaluating a landscape. Rather Deutsche addresses the issues of politics, public art, and use of public space. Her article raises political issues that are important to discussions of landscape architecture and are not addressed or even masked when design is assessed based on the “newness” of its aesthetic approach. How is art political? Is criticism political? If discourse about landscape architecture needs to move beyond aesthetic descriptions and comparisons, what kinds of information should be assessed?

### **Case Study 1: The Public Park as Avant-Garde (Landscape) Architecture**

In “The Public Park as Avant-Garde (Landscape) Architecture,” Elizabeth Meyer compares Bernard Tschumi’s Parc de la Villette and Alphand’s Parc des Buttes Chaumont. Both Tschumi and the project-competition judges described Parc de la Villette as a work of avant-garde design. In order to challenge this assertion, Meyer argues that Tschumi’s park cannot be avant-garde because “[i]f a work is to be avant-

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<sup>a</sup> The sculpture was replaced by a design by Martha Schwartz and the site was renamed Jacob Javits Plaza.

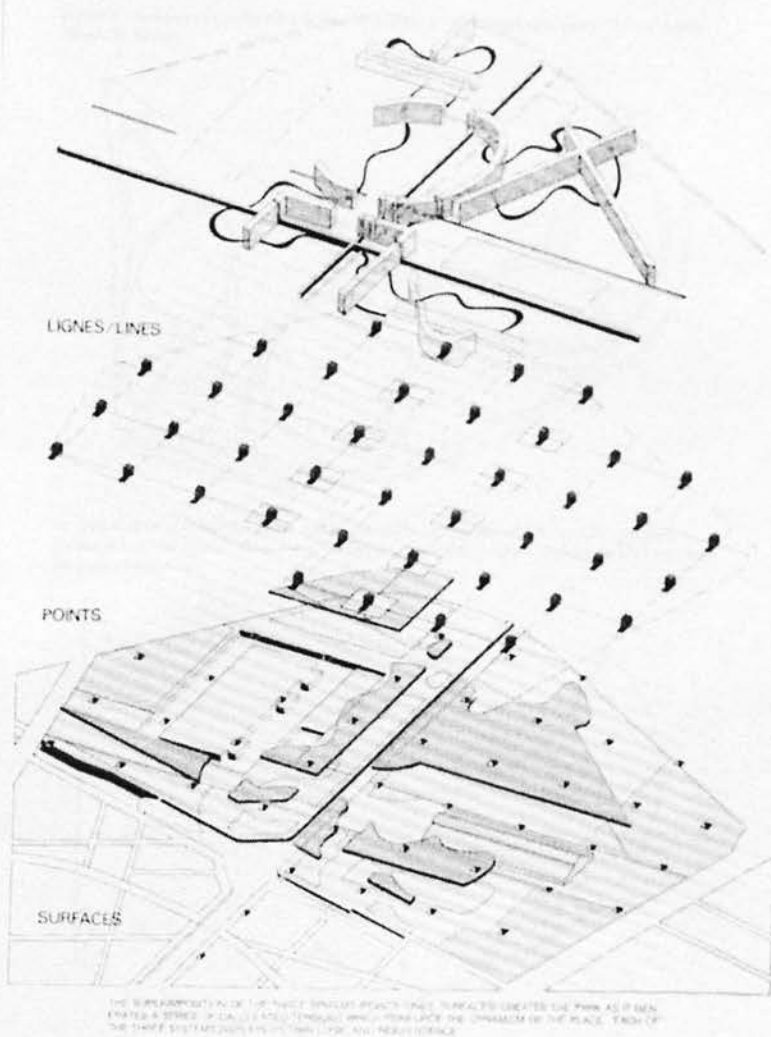


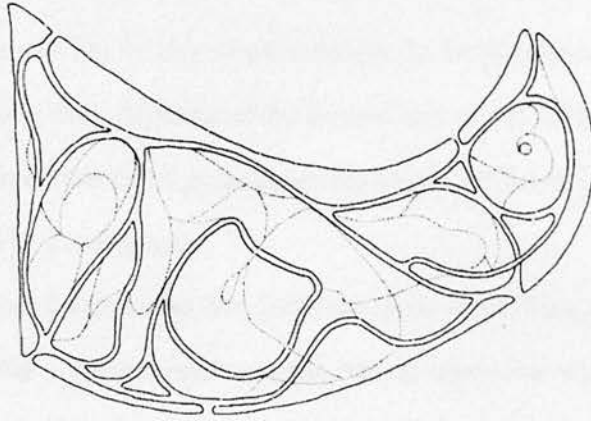
Figure 2. Parc de la Villette's systems aesthetic is manifest in the superimposition of three autonomous layers: points, lines and surfaces, on a neutral site. Drawing by Bernard Tschumi from *Concepts for Parc de la Villette* (1967). Reprinted courtesy of Bernard Tschumi.

**Figure 15.** Diagram for Parc de la Villette, Bernard Tschumi.

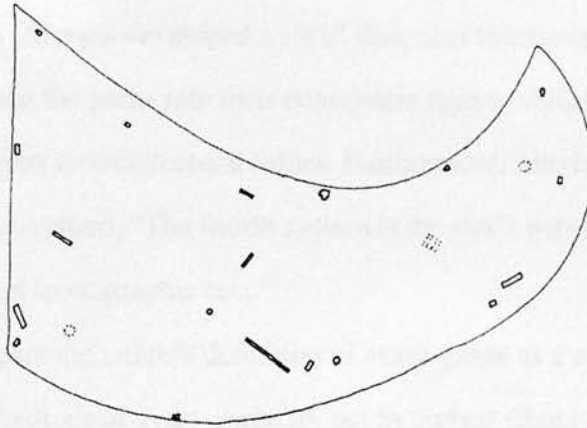
Meyers contrasts the work of Tschumi at Parc de la Villette against Alphand's Parc des Buttes Chaumont to show that Tschumi's work could not be avant-gardist since similar ordering principles had been applied previously. Meyer's conception of avant-garde is based on the idea of being new in one's field, or challenging tradition.

*Elizabeth Meyer, "The Public Park as Avant-Garde (Landscape) Architecture: A Comparative Interpretation of Two Parisian Parks, Parc de la Villette (1983-1990) and Parc des Buttes-Chaumont (1864-1867)," Landscape Journal 10, no. 1 (1991):*

Figure 4. Analysis of the Parc des Buttes Chaumont's "superimposed layers." Drawings by Elizabeth Meyer.



4a. The system of lines is comprised of a) vehicular circulation which inscribes the park perimeter and the base of the mounds, and b) pedestrian circulation which provides access to the park's highpoints.



4b. The system of points consists of follies (gatehouses, cafes, overlook pavilions) and bridges (when the system of lines is superimposed on undulating terrain). This random distribution of points contrasts with la Villette's point grid, but is similar to the random system originally considered for la Villette by Tschumi's design team.

**Figure 16.** Diagram, Parc des Buttes Chaumont, Elizabeth Meyer, 1991. Meyers developed a set of four diagrams to be compared to Tschumi's diagrams for Parc de la Villette. These diagrams were part of Meyer's argument that Alphand had explored spatial ideas similar to those explored by Tschumi but earlier.

*Elizabeth Meyer, "The Public Park as Avant-Garde (Landscape) Architecture: A Comparative Interpretation of Two Parisian Parks, Parc de la Villette (1983-1990) and Parc des Buttes-Chaumont (1864-1867)," Landscape Journal 10, no. 1 (1991): 16.*

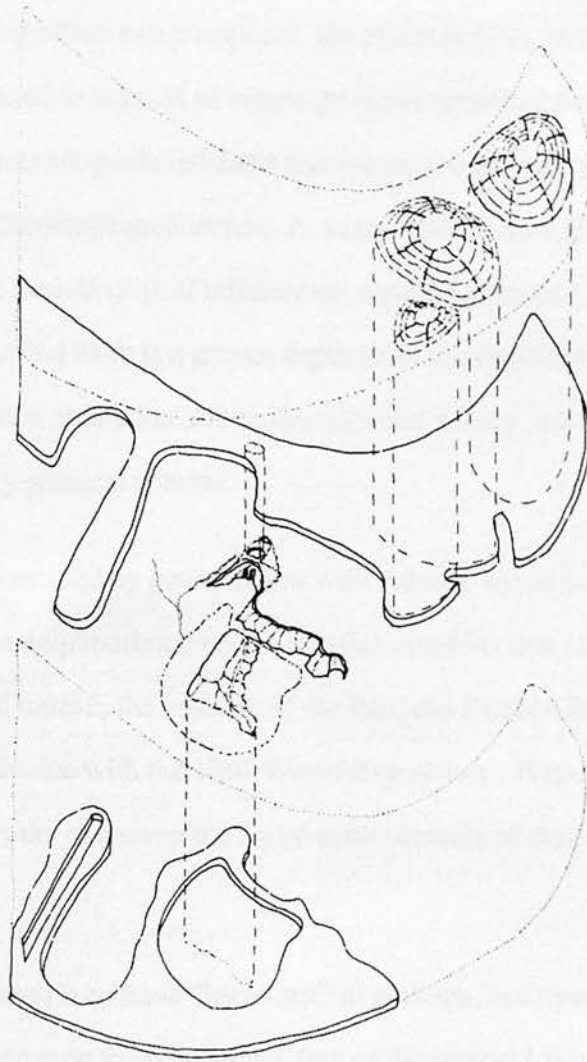


garde, it must consciously reject the traditions of its genre."<sup>2</sup> To do so, the avant-garde designer must understand the tradition in which she works. Since, Meyer states, Tschumi was unaware of the history of park design, he employed design principles similar to ones employed by Alphand in the second half of the 19th Century. Tschumi acted within rather than outside of park design tradition. Differently stated, Tschumi was 120 years too late to be avant-garde.

The similarities between the two parks are made clear, Meyer argues, by comparing their spatial organizational systems. Meyer states that while Tschumi felt that his work was unique in that it superimposed layers of plane, line and point, Alphand used a similar technique at Buttes Chaumont. And Meyer adds, Alphand did so with greater complexity. Meyers developed a set of diagrams to expose these similarities. The diagrams break apart the parks into their constituent layers: surfaces or topography, circulation, and points or architectural follies. Furthermore, Meyer's states, Alphand added an additional system, "The fourth system is the site's natural and social history, supplemented by an iconographic text."<sup>3</sup>

If we compare the article's definition of avant-garde as a conscious break from tradition to the definitions of avant-garde set out by Egbert (Saint-Simonian political-change, art-for-art's sake and tool of political system), Meyer's criteria seems most closely related to art-for-art's-sake. Meyers judged the park as avant-garde because of its spatial, experiential and visual attributes. Intricate details about the topography, the experience of walking along the paths, and the detailing and their Greek references, are depicted in words, diagrams, and pictures. Avant-garde status is given to Parc des Buttes Chaumont based on the fact that these qualities are different from those employed in park design before. Whether or not an earlier designer employed a similar method to Alphand prior to Parc des Buttes Chaumont would be difficult to assess.

What seems clear is that because of the definition of avant-garde Meyer employs, information about how Parc Buttes-Chaumont related to the political/social



4c. The system of surfaces includes the lower lake and railroad elevation, the middle circulation promenades, and the upper four mounds. Connecting these levels is the subsurface limestone grotto and outcrop created from the preexisting quarry on the site.

**Figure 17.** Diagram of Parc des Buttes Chaumont, by Elizabeth Meyer. The final diagrams of the set show how Alphand incorporated topographic elements in his system of superimposed layers, elements that Tschumi did not incorporate in his system.

*Elizabeth Meyer, "The Public Park as Avant-Garde (Landscape) Architecture: A Comparative Interpretation of Two Parisian Parks, Parc de la Villette (1983-1990) and Parc des Buttes-Chaumont (1864-1867)," Landscape Journal 10, no. 1 (1991): 21 .*

climate of Paris is revealed only in broad terms, figuratively, or not at all. If criticism and theory form a basis for action in a discipline<sup>b</sup>, the absence of an understanding of how built landscapes are used to support or negate particular political structures is a concern. Meyer's definition of avant-garde indicates that we need only look at visual and spatial aesthetics to discuss landscape architecture. It is important to note that while this article does move to include social/political information regarding Buttes-Chaumont's development, the idea that there is a greater depth to this information may not be obvious. To an audience unfamiliar with political/social history<sup>c</sup> the following statement provides the necessary political context:

Both parks were sited by governments with specific social and political objectives in a neighborhood on the Parisian outskirts that had a history of neglect and unrest...the opening of the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont was planned to coincide with the 1867 World Exposition...Napoleon III used public works to convey the social achievements of the French people.<sup>4</sup>

What does Meyer's critique "leave out" or perhaps, not identify at all? How important is this information to an understanding of the project? Why is this information important to discussions of landscape architecture? Certainly in the quotation above, the statement "Napoleon III used public works to convey the social achievements of the French people," is problematic. Had Meyer examined this project and the larger restructuring of Paris, against a political definition of avant-garde or from any political perspective, this assertion would have been impossible. A political

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<sup>b</sup> See: Margaret McAvin, ed., "Landscape Architecture and Critical Inquiry," *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 2 (1991): 155-172.

<sup>c</sup> This point is important to make since many students of landscape architecture I have encountered in teaching at Rutgers University have not taken courses in history outside of what they may have taken in high school. Based on the intensive set of requirements for completing an undergraduate or graduate degree in landscape architecture in the United States, it is difficult for students to take courses in outside departments. The history of landscape architecture survey course is often a student's only exposure to history or cultural studies.

definition of avant-garde would require the critic to ask questions about who stood to gain or lose because of the development of the park. While these are complex issues and it is often difficult to claim that one group of people suffered and one group gained as a result of a particular public works project there has been a great deal of historical work that indicates that Napoleon III and his supporters gained as a result of the physical restructuring of Paris. But since Meyer employs a critical model that judges a design based on visual aesthetics and physical organization these ideas need not be raised. Had this been the only such miss-characterization of the work of Napoleon III and its social goals in Meyer's article, we might be less inclined to make the claim that a discussion of the formalistic and iconographic in the design of public spaces devalues political understanding. That is, since Meyer judged these projects and their "worth" against a set of aesthetic criteria she does not need to discuss the project's politics.

Meyer identifies four separate groups who must be involved in the interpretation of a work as avant-garde: the artist, the institution that the artist rejects, the mass public, and the critic. "Seen through the lens of the new work, the public's new perspective on the institution of art changes the institution, the world, and hence the conditions by which the avant-garde is designed."<sup>5</sup> To restate: by challenging the field, it changes the world, which in turn changes the field. The step from changing the field to changing the world seems a large jump. How did the formal structures employed by Alphand change the way the public viewed the institution of landscape architecture? How did the way in which the public viewed the formal strategies of landscape architecture change the world? The step from changing the world back down to changing the field seems extremely disappointing. How could a work, which sets out only to be new in its field change the world? And how can the work of a discipline like landscape architecture, which most often occurs within the public realm using public dollars, only affect itself?

Meyer's statements highlight two problems in landscape architectural discourse. The first is that tenuous assertions are often made about the effects of one designer and one design-move. For example: "I revealed the history of the site," or "this element shows the site's geologic history." These overstatements fail to question the relationship



between the actual history of the site and what gets “selected” for revealing/consumption. The second problem is less an overstatement than an understatement. The design, which changed “the world,” then goes on to only change the way we frame the argument of the avant-garde for our particular discipline. This collapsing of the bounds of discussion back to landscape architecture - and only its formal qualities - is fundamentally disappointing. It indicates a lost opportunity for asking questions about how landscape architecture has a larger social impact. On the one hand, this statement valorises the new and on the other it strips value from the accretion of real choices made in the design process. These choices may or may not have any formal representation, but add to an overall social effect.

Through this case study, it is argued that a political rather than formal definition of avant-garde and a political rather than formal critique would have led to a much stronger understanding of the Parc des Buttes Chaumont. The bias behind this assertion is that, especially when looking at the public works of Napoleon III, any “formalistic” goals that Alphand may have had were less important from an historical perspective than the political effects of control, dislocation of the poor, and suppression of revolution. Formalistic here refers to the park’s overall spatial configuration, the kind of architectural details it includes, the materials of which it was constructed, the circulation system, and the planting design. It is understood, particularly in light of the formal biases often found in the history of landscape architecture, that this assertion may not be considered appropriate in discussions of the history of landscape architecture. One could argue that historians or social theorists best undertake political analysis of public spaces and that the goal of landscape architectural theory is an understanding of how designed landscapes function spatially and experientially. Cultural geographer Denis E. Cosgrove identifies the need for understanding landscape<sup>d</sup> in ways that go beyond

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<sup>d</sup> Cosgrove defines landscape in its broadest sense including designed and un-designed landscapes, “nature,” and human’s perceptions and representations of the land.

design. As an introductory essay to *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Cosgrove states:

My primary intention in 1984 was to press landscape studies, especially in Geography, towards what seemed to me specific new directions: to locate landscape interpretation within a critical historiography, to theorize the idea of landscape within a broadly Marxian understanding of culture and society, and thus to extend the treatment of landscape beyond what seemed to me a prevailing narrow focus on design and taste.<sup>6</sup>

This case study seeks to understand the benefits and deficits of both approaches and argues that an understanding of the complexities of landscapes beyond formal design must be addressed. It argues that this kind of criticism is appropriate and necessary to landscape architectural theory. For many reasons, Buttes-Chaumont would seem an obvious and important choice for political analysis. It was a major public space commissioned by Napoleon III, on a site which had been a quarry, the Montfaucon gallows, a sanitary sewage dump, and a "mass grave for those killed during periods of civil unrest"<sup>7</sup> in a neighborhood "with a history of neglect and unrest."<sup>8</sup> These all seem to be clues that more than just a formal analysis of the design needs to be undertaken. In answer to the question raised in the introduction to this case study, which asked what kinds of landscape architectural projects might it be important to understand from a political perspective, certainly major public works projects by governments like the Second Empire stand out. Especially in light of the fact that Alphand's park was part of a much larger restructuring of Paris. Landscape historian Massey Schenker (1995) supports this assertion.

[T]he decision to build the parks was not politically innocent...the parks cannot be understood without the political context...they are bound up in and reflective of the political conflicts and internal inconsistencies that characterized Napoleon III's administration.<sup>9</sup>

In order to better understand what is missing from Meyer's discussion of Parc des Buttes Chaumont and why this information is important, we must first discuss the missing contextual political history of Paris at that time. Henri Lefebvre, in his *Writings on Cities*, presents his perspective: "As urban democracy threatened the privileges of the new ruling class, that class prevented it from being born. How? By expelling from the urban centre and the city itself the proletariat, by destroying 'urbanity.'"<sup>10</sup> Although lengthy and it might be argued, theatrical, this quotation, again from Lefebvre's *Writings on Cities*, describes how, in particular, Haussmann's projects supported the goal of quelling democracy in Paris.

Baron Haussmann, man of this Bonapartist State which erects itself over society to treat it cynically as the booty (and not only the stake) of the struggles for power...If he forces through boulevards and plans open spaces, it is not for the beauty of views. It is to 'comb Paris with machine guns'. The famous Baron makes no secret of it...The voids have a meaning: they cry out loud and clear the glory and power of the State which plans them, the violence which could occur.<sup>11</sup>

Schenker's characterization, while less polemical than Lefebvre's, is similar in content.

There can be no doubt that politics played an important role in shaping the parks of the Second Empire in Paris. Spaced over the increasingly delineated social map of Parks, the parks were critical to maintaining political balance, anchoring certain strategic neighborhoods, forging new identities for *quartiers* in the annexed zone, and bringing these areas into a net of social and political control cast over the city by Haussmann.<sup>12</sup>

Meyer goes into great detail in her descriptions of the design of the park. But it can be argued that even the details of the design, in particular the "the site's natural and cultural history, supplemented by an iconographic text,"<sup>13</sup> may also have been better understood from a political perspective. It could be argued that subtle issues regarding how Alphand's park may have functioned to gloss-over the violence experienced in Paris

by the employment of this iconographic text is not only overlooked, but may have been misinterpreted. The “text” refers to architectural elements in the park like the Temple of Sibyl, which sits on top of a steep island:

Capping the island, the Temple of Sibyl refers to Aneneas' structure honoring Sibyl, who led that traveler safely out of the Underworld, here represented in the cavernous grotto that embodies the collective memory of past political terror in Paris and represents that memory through the sublime experience of an artificial nature...Its form, materials, and iconography testify to the ability of science to transform the city, to lead it out of the underworld.<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, the grotto was used as a munitions store by the Communards during the 1870 uprising and was one of their last strongholds.<sup>15</sup> It is also interesting to note that in 1870 the National Defence government promoted Alphand to Colonel and entrusted him with Paris' fortifications and advanced forts. He subsequently pursued an administrative career and succeeded in consolidating all public works affairs under his supervision, including, upon Belgrand's death in 1878, the Water Department. With the World Fair returning to Paris that same year, Alphand participated in the preparations by laying out the gardens of the new Trocadéro. He brilliantly ended his career as director of the 1889 World Fair.<sup>16</sup> . It could be argued that the design devices of spatial and iconographic complexity continue to mask Napoleon's political agenda. Parc des Buttes Chaumont is an important part of the canon of landscape architectural design. Students are presented with the park and the work of Haussmann and Alphand as examples of large-scale public improvement works. They are examples of designs that reach a high level of sophistication and indicate professional progress. However, when viewed as examples of design used to subvert public life do they still represent professional progress?

Parc des Buttes-Chaumont was not without its detractors. Massey Schenker notes that William Robinson's description of the park was particularly critical:



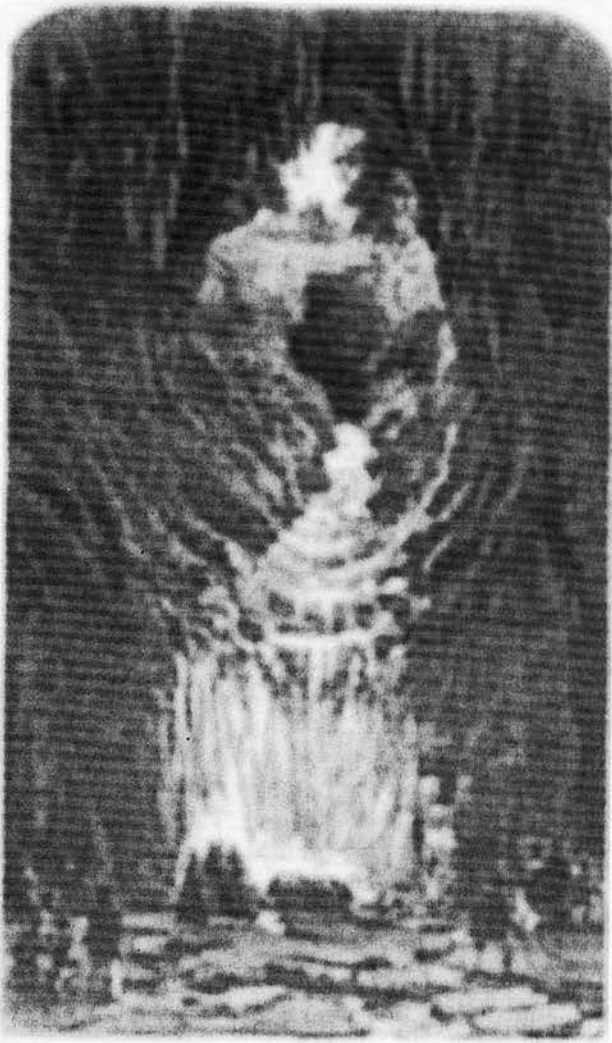


Figure 11. Buttes Chaumont's fourth system, the site, is represented in the grotto which connects two surfaces of the park. Above at the "underlook," two strollers view down into the park's subsurface structure. Below, having entered from the lake level, park visitors are presented with the "awesome" scale of the grotto and the marvels of the engineered water display. Source: Alphand and Ennaut, 1885.

**Figure 18.** Grotto at Parc des Buttes Chaumont.

Meyers noted that the grotto formed part of the park's iconography. According to Meyers, the grotto symbolized the underworld or the *past* political terror in Paris. Ironically, the grotto would become the site for *present* political terror as one of the last strongholds of the Communards.

*Elizabeth Meyer, "The Public Park as Avant-Garde (Landscape) Architecture: A Comparative Interpretation of Two Parisian Parks, Parc de la Villette (1983-1990) and Parc des Buttes-Chaumont (1864-1867)," Landscape Journal 10, no. 1 (1991): 25.*

The entrance is not promising -- a hard-looking porter's lodge, and a mass of badly-made rockwork face a mound, and from the rockwork springs an apparently quite unnecessary bridge. The rockwork is bad because, although superior in general design to the masses of burnt bricks that sometimes pass for it with us, it shows radical faults -- presumption and unnaturalness. Instead of a true rockwork, something like a very puny attempt at reproducing the more insignificant ribs of Monte Campione is the result of plastering over a heap of stones. A hole is left here and there in this mass from which may spring a small pine or an ivy, but the whole thing is incapable of being divested of its bald artificial character.<sup>17</sup>

Because Meyer's determination of avant-garde status requires only an understanding of how Alphand's work rejected previously employed spatial and iconographic techniques, a questioning of who was most affected by Napoleon III's reconstruction of Paris (of which Buttes-Chaumont was only one part) is not addressed:

The existing city and its history was civilized by the *superimposing* recycled urban space – boulevards and parks – upon the city... cultural traces like Buttes-Chaumont were not regularized (à la Haussmann), but allowed to remain as evidence of the city's historic sedimentation or layering. The sedimentary city was resistant – in historically significant locales – to the geometry of alignment and regularization.<sup>18</sup>

An indication of the social costs of “regularization” and the social “resistance” to Napoleon III's restructuring of Paris can be found in “Parks and Politics During the Second Empire” by Heath Massey Schenker:

The condemnation of buildings to put through the new, wide boulevards displaced poor tenants, crowding them into nearby areas of substandard housing...the relentless evictions and demolitions, the din of construction, the dust, the disruption took their toll on Parisians...<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 19.** Paris boulevard with barricade and cannon. [1870?]. This image shows how Communards used newly installed street pavers from Haussmann's boulevards to construct barricades. Also visible are recently planted trees. Tree grates were sometimes used in the barricades as well. Over 600 barricades were constructed. When a barricade fell during the fighting, the defenders were put up against a wall and shot.

*Northwestern University Library -- Special Collections, The Siege and Commune of Paris, 1870-1871. Retrieved June 1, 2000 from the World Wide Web:*

*<http://www.library.nwu.edu/spec/siege/>*

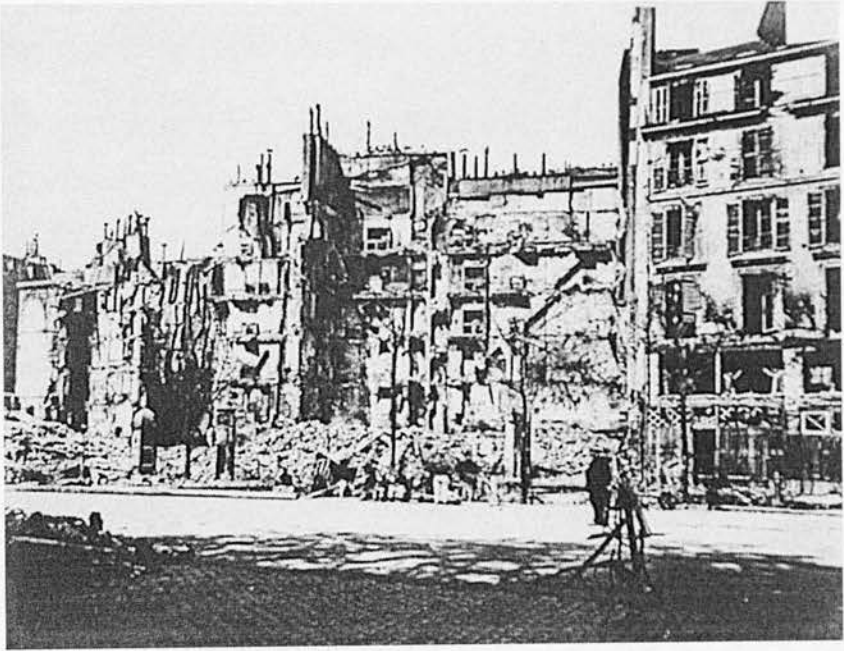
In the following quotation cited by Massey Schenker from Emile Zola's *L'Assommoir* an argument between two friends exposes the contradictions of Napoleon III's program.

The former went on and on about the Paris demolitions, accusing the Emperor of building palaces everywhere so as to pack the workers off into the provinces, and the policeman, white with suppressed anger, riposted that on the contrary the Emperor's first thoughts were for the workers, and that he would demolish the whole of Paris if necessary, simply to make work for them.<sup>20</sup>

The related concepts of regularization and unification as illusions of public space redevelopment will be discussed further in the second case of this chapter. Certainly they played an important role in the restructuring of Paris. Buck-Morss notes that while the objects in the space of Paris were rearranged, the social relationships of class antagonism remained. "Haussmann's slum 'clearance' simply broke up working-class neighborhoods and moved the eyesores and health hazards of poverty out of central Paris...The urban "perspectives" which Haussmann created from wide boulevards...were intended to give the fragmented city an appearance of coherence."<sup>21</sup> And, quoting Benjamin, Buck-Morss states: "In fact the plan, based on a politics of imperial centralization, was a totalitarian aesthetics, in that it caused 'the repression of every individualistic part, every autonomous development' of the city, creating an artificial city where the Parisian...no longer feels at home."<sup>22</sup>

This may be a good time to return to the question of what is lost when a definition of the avant-garde based on the art-for-art's-sake model is used as a basis for landscape architectural criticism. First, and most obviously, is that a discussion of politics, implicit or explicit, supported or negated by landscape architecture is avoided. This is not to say that landscape architectural critics would need to completely rewrite political history in order to include it in their research. But there is an additional set of questions to be asked which could move discussion beyond statements similar to: "Buttes-Chaumont was a device for viewing the spectacle and the splendor of the





**Figure 20.** Rue Royal, Paris. 1871. This image gives a sense of the destruction that resulted from the suppression of the Paris Commune. Approximately 30,000 Parisians were dead by the end of the fighting. It also portrays the intensity of the politics that were at play in France during the reign of Napoleon III.

*Northwestern University Library -- Special Collections, The Siege and Commune of Paris, 1870-1871. Retrieved June 1, 2000 from the World Wide Web:*

*<http://www.library.nwu.edu/spec/siege/>*

Second Empire's industrial and artistic urban accomplishments."<sup>23</sup> These questions include: how was the development of public space part of a larger project to rearrange Paris according to class? How was the development of such public spaces as the Paris promenades an important part of the development of consumer capitalism? How was the iconographic text in parks like Buttes Chaumont employed to sublimate past violence? How did the parks function from a tactical standpoint, both political in terms of the neighborhoods they served and military, again in terms of their location and their design? How were individual parks designed to minimize the possibility of demonstrations and insurrections, which were so much a part of Paris' present, recent, past, and near future?

Political histories, which seek to examine how the restructuring of cities and landscapes relates to politics, exist but do not commonly make their way into the curriculum of landscape architectural education. In his book, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Denis E. Cosgrove provides such a discussion about landscapes including those of Renaissance Italy, American colonial society, and 18<sup>th</sup> Century British estates like Rousham,<sup>6</sup> all of which are considered part of the landscape architectural history "canon."

The estate landscape whose iconography had been refined during the seventeenth century (Adams, 1979) became in the eighteenth a critical arena of cultural production, and of cultural tension between fractions of the ruling class. Its most significant new aspect was the adoption of a set of motifs which seemed to many to mark the decisive victory in England of liberty over absolutism and of property over fiefdom.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rousham was the estate of General James Dormer, which was redesigned by William Kent. Rousham is considered to be part of the "canon" of landscape architectural history.

*The City of Collective Memory*, by M. Christine Boyer gives an indication of the kind of discourse regarding land use, design and politics which exists in architectural history.

Guy Debord has written that 'the spectacle is capital accumulated until it becomes an image,' and T.J. Clark has used this concept of spectacle in referring to the changes Baron von Haussmann wrought to the Paris of Napoleon III. The spectacle was an attempt to colonize the realm of everyday life, to extend the capitalist market into the private arena of leisure time and personal styles and into the public scenery of boulevards and department store, it altered the space of the nineteenth-century city, producing new urban forms and new building types.<sup>25</sup>

Boyer's discussion of the work of the Second Empire in Paris comes under a chapter titled, "Historical Precedents for the City of Collective Memory." A discussion of the restructuring of American cities during the 1980s comes under a chapter titled, "Contemporary forms of the City of Collective Memory." In this discussion, Boyer characterizes the reasons for certain spatial restructuring projects in the United States at this particular time.

There are many reasons why cityscapes of the 1980s were filled with civic gestures and grand discourses on history, drawing the spectator's gaze away from its seamier underside. American leaders, for example, having suffered the protests of students, environmentalists, women, and civil rights groups during the 1960s, still painfully aware of the failures endured during the Vietnam War, and concerned about the dissolution of family values, sense in the 1970s and 1980s a deep cultural crisis and loss of order...architectural expansionism...set up boundaries that maintained a distance from the unemployed, impoverished, and outmoded ...no one appeared to look beyond the gilded frame of the city tableaux to observe the violent conflicts left out of the picture. The

spectator's vision was lured by the aesthetic architectural object, by the pleasures and refined gestures it referenced, until finally the homeless, the dispossessed and the displaced, the downgraded, devalued, and disturbing became an aesthetic and social nuisance to be pushed still further away, until they became expelled entirely from both sight and sensibilities.<sup>26</sup>

While it is not accurate to say that all urban redevelopment in the United States during the 1980s was an attempt to draw attention away from social problems, the point that public works can be and have been used in such a way is important to make in discussions of landscape architecture. This quotation also brings the discussion of politics and public space from nineteenth century Paris, to twentieth century New York.

One final question in this case study must be raised. It has been argued that if Meyer had employed a political rather than formalistic/aesthetic definition of avant-garde as a critical tool, more important information regarding the restructuring of Paris would have been uncovered. For example, Meyer may have looked at the way in which spatial, visual, and iconographic devices were used to reinforce the power structure of Napoleon III. But if it can be argued that the use of a political definition is more appropriate in certain cases, can it be argued that an art-for-art's sake formal aesthetic definition is sometimes a more effective critical tool? It is possible to identify cases where an art-for-art's sake mode of questioning would be preferable? Perhaps in understanding how spaces are organized spatially, or how topography influences circulation. An additional and perhaps more important distinction must be made. A landscape's formal qualities and spatial organization system may be used as tools to support or negate economic and political systems and/or may be reflective of the presence of these systems. However, these design elements do not *produce* these systems. Democracy cannot be produced by the spatial organization of a community. Rather design elements in combination with systems of economics, management and policing, on-site and within the city at large work together to reinforce particular systems of power. The violence and coercion of the boulevards and parks during the reign of Napoleon III may seem distant concerns to

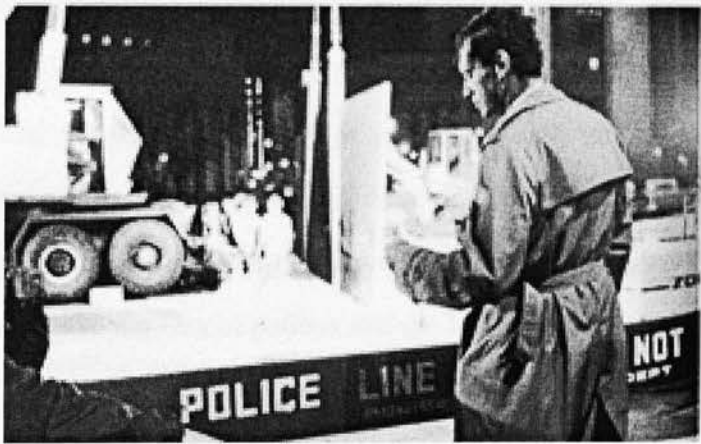
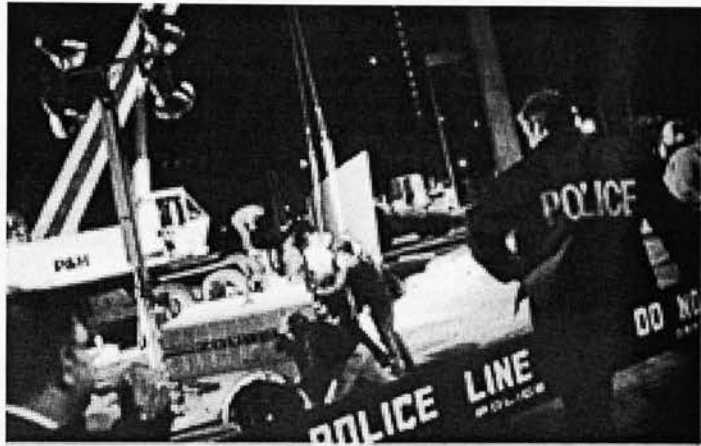


contemporary residents of Paris. However, to design professionals and critics, the combinations of power and space must be interrogated.

## **Case 2: An Example of a Political Criticism of Public Art and Public Space**

Rosalyn Deutsche, in “*Tilted Arc* and the Uses of Democracy,” addresses questions surrounding the terms public, space, and site-specific-art, in a manner that reveals the implicit politics within these terms. This case study was chosen for several reasons. The project Deutsche discusses, Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc*, was extremely high profile within the fields of art history and criticism. The circumstances surrounding the sculpture’s removal and the site’s redesign sparked one of the most publicized debates surrounding art and public space and led to the development of a celebrated and controversial landscape design in New York City. She argues for an explicit critical discussion of politics and public space. Deutsche discusses the idea that “public” and “appropriate use” are defined by the way in which spaces are designed and conceptualised. Similarly, the ways “public” and “appropriate use” are defined lead to decisions about public space design and management. Deutsche discusses two kinds of public art that relate directly to landscape architectural design and politics. She argues for site-specific public art and against “new public art.” Martha Schwartz’s redesign of Federal Plaza will be discussed in Chapter 4.

The following is a brief history of Serra’s *Tilted Arc* and the controversy surrounding its removal. In 1979 the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) commissioned Richard Serra to design a sculpture for the plaza in front of the New York Federal Building, known as 26 Federal Plaza in lower Manhattan. The building houses about 10,000 federal employees in nearly 2.8 million gross square feet. At 42 floors, the Federal Building is largest civilian federal office building in the country. The public art project was funded through the GSA’s Art-in-Architecture program. Under this program one-half of one percent of any new building’s or building under construction’s estimated construction cost would be set aside for the incorporation of



**Figure 21.** William Diamond, New York Regional Administrator of the GSA, supervising Removal of Tilted Arc.

*Published in Clara Wyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk, Tilted Arc: Documents (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).*

fine art. The sculpture Serra created for the site, titled *Tilted Arc*, became one of the most controversial works of public art in the US.

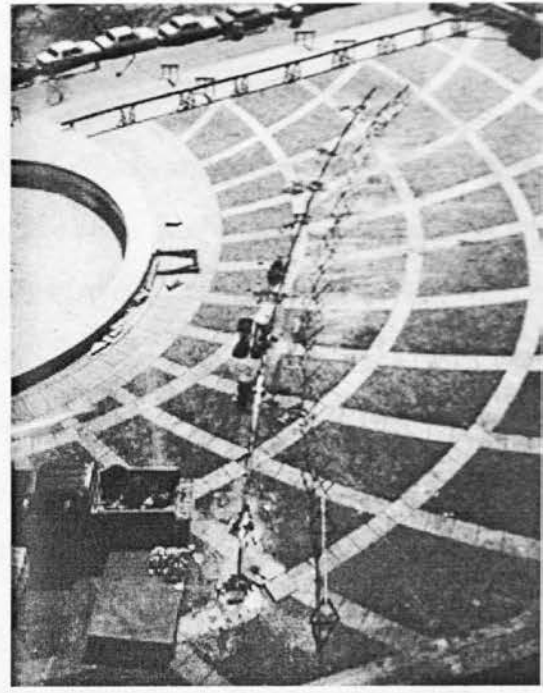
“This is a day for the people to rejoice...because now the plaza returns rightfully to the people.”<sup>27</sup> For those unfamiliar with the history of *Tilted Arc*, it might seem that this celebratory statement was made by the New York Regional Administrator of the GSA at the sculpture’s unveiling, rather than upon its removal. Two days before this statement was published in the *New York Post*, a crew worked through the night sawing and torching the 120 feet long, twelve feet high several inch thick, CorTen-steel curve. The pieces were then transported to Brooklyn for storage. Photographs of the sculpture’s demolition and of the arc-shaped cut left in the plaza after its removal, illustrate the final outcome of an eight-year legal battle between the artist and the client. The debates that occurred in the press and in the courts over Serra’s work have been discussed by art historians including Rosalyn Deutsche and Douglas Crimp, and reveal a set of issues basic to the idea of politics and the landscape.

Serra’s most vocal and powerful detractors, whose combined efforts led to the sculpture’s dismantling, were Judge Edward D. Re, Chief Judge of the U.S. Court of International Trade and Reagan appointee William Diamond, the GSA’s New York Regional Administrator. In 1985, Diamond convened a hearing to decide whether the *Tilted Arc* should be “relocated” in order to increase “public use” of the plaza. Diamond appointed himself as hearing chairman and also appointed the panel. Arguments against Serra’s work found in letters and hearing testimony most often cited aesthetic<sup>f</sup> dislike of the sculpture, describing it as an eyesore that should be removed.

Between 1986 and 1989, Serra took legal action to prevent the removal of *Tilted Arc* but was unsuccessful. In a letter written by Serra in January 1985 to Don Thalacker, the Director of the Art-in-Architecture Program of the GSA, Serra states: “Since I understand that the GSA is already offering my piece for relocation, I want to make it

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<sup>f</sup> Aesthetic is used here to indicate visual appearance.



**Figure 22.** Federal Plaza before and after the removal of Tilted Arc.

*Published in Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk, Tilted Arc: Documents (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).*

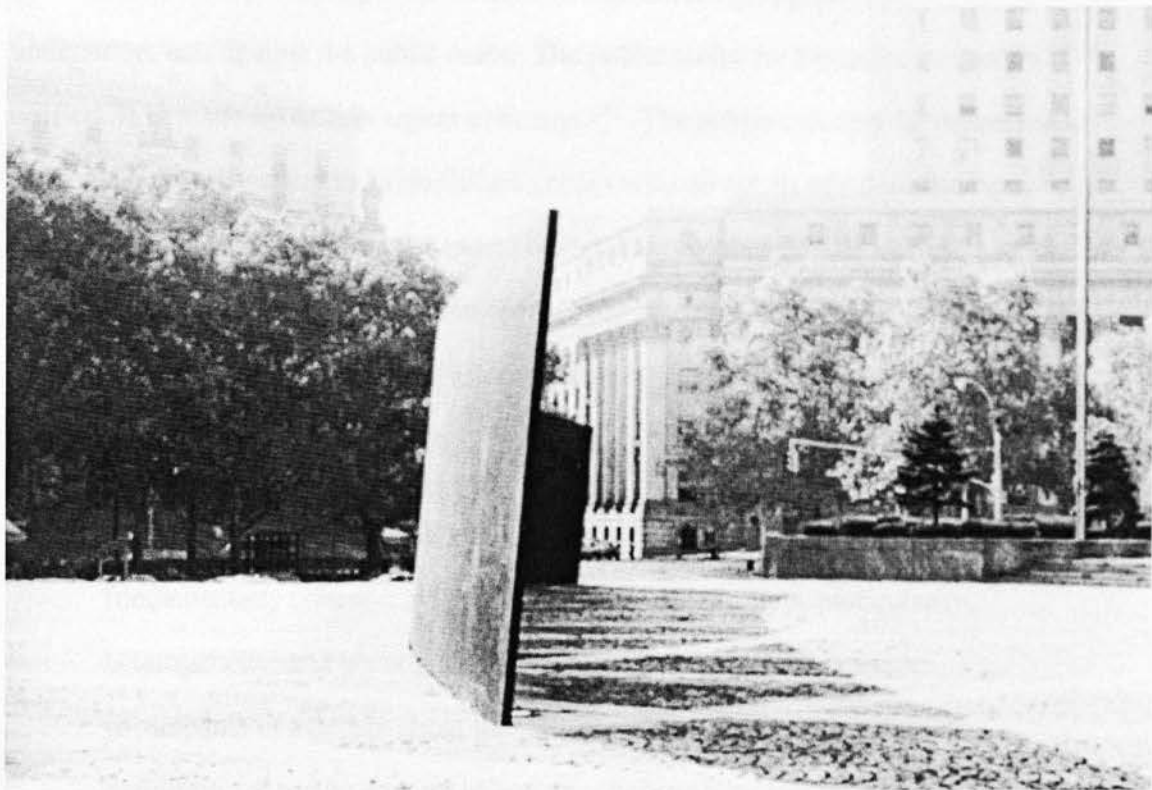


perfectly clear that *Tilted Arc* was commissioned and designed for one particular site: Federal Plaza. It is a site-specific work and as such not to be relocated. To remove the work is to destroy the work.”<sup>28</sup> In 1989 *Tilted Arc* was removed from Federal Plaza.

Within the hearing debates, opponents of *Tilted Arc* argued that the presence of the sculpture decreased public use of the site. The piece itself was a large steel arc within an open plaza. Deutsche’s article does not give a physical description of the sculpture and how it works on the site. She does not give an explanation of what Serra’s sculpture was in itself trying to convey. Instead, Deutsche describes how the debates about *Tilted Arc* raised questions about the definitions of public and space, and the political implications of these definitions. Both of these are crucial to our understanding of the politics of urban landscape architecture.

Of particular interest to our larger discussion is that at the core of the GSA debate was a perceived conflict between public use of the space and the presence of Serra’s sculpture; you could have one, but not both. The argument links spatial configuration with what constitutes appropriate use of a public space. “The Destruction of *Tilted Arc*: Documents,” is a collection of testimony and hearing documents. Deutsche’s discussion of these documents indicates that public space can be controlled by public officials by what they declare as appropriate use of that space. “As the editors of *The Destruction of Tilted Arc* point out, official announcements of the hearing contained an implied value judgment, framing the proposed debate as a contest between, on the one hand, *Tilted Arc*’s continued presence in the Federal Plaza and, on the other hand, increased ‘public use of the plaza.’ Clearly, it had been predetermined that the sculpture’s presence detracted from ‘public use,’ but this judgment assumed that definitions of ‘public’ and ‘use’ are self-evident.”<sup>29</sup>

GSA never defined the terms “public” and “use,” even though they based their arguments for removal of *Tilted Arc* on specific ideas about who should be allowed to use the space and how. “Clearly, it had been predetermined that the sculpture’s presence detracted from ‘public use,’ but this judgment assumed that definitions of ‘public and ‘use’ are self-evident.”<sup>30</sup> Deutsche argues that choosing *not* to define these



**Figure 23.** Federal Plaza, New York. *Tilted Arc*, by Richard Serra. Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* was removed from Federal Plaza in New York amid discussions of whether or not Federal Plaza was "usable" with the sculpture in place. It was contended that the sculpture prevented the "public" from "using" the space and the sculpture was ordered to be removed. Deutsche's critical work that includes discussions of *Tilted Arc*, is more concerned with the definitions "public" and "use" than any political "statement" the piece itself may have been conveying. Deutsche calls to our attention the fact that politics is directly related to terms that form the basis for landscape architecture in the public realm.

*Clara Weyergraf and Martha Buskirk, ed., The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1988), 130.*

terms and instead, presenting them as terms whose meaning is given and implicitly understood, acts against the public realm. The public realm for Deutsche cannot be unified. It is made up of “divergent concerns.”<sup>31</sup> The public can only be defined as a homogenous entity when individuals and groups who do not fit this definition are excluded. Deutsche states that the most powerful antagonists of *Tilted Arc*: “...spoke in the name of certainties like ‘common sense,’ ‘reality,’ and ‘the people’s interest.’ The appeal to such absolute grounds of meaning sheltered their arguments from political interrogation.”<sup>32</sup>

Categories like ‘the public’ can, of course, be construed as naturally or fundamentally coherent only by disavowing the conflicts, particularity, heterogeneity, and uncertainty that constitute social life. But when participants in a debate about the uses of public space remove the definitions of public and use to a realm of objectivity located not only outside the *Tilted Arc* debate but also outside debate altogether, they threaten to erase public space itself. For what initiates debate about social questions if not the absence of absolute sources of meaning and the concomitant recognition that these questions – including the question of the meaning of public space – are decided only *in* a public space?<sup>33</sup>

While the statement “erase public space itself” seems to conflate the physical location called public space with the concept of public forum, or public debate, Deutsche’s point is clear. Decisions that are made about appropriate use of the physical locations of public space can control who is part of the public. By limiting what can happen in a public space, we can limit who can be there. Central to Deutsche’s definitions of “democracy,” “public,” and “use,” is the idea of the absence of absolute meanings. Democracy, to Deutsche, is not about agreement, but about sustained conflict: “The hallmark of democracy, says Lefort, is the disappearance of certainty about the foundations of social life. Uncertainty makes democratic power the antithesis of the absolutist monarchical power it destroys.”<sup>34</sup>

But what were the physical qualities of *Tilted Arc* and Federal Plaza? Did the presence of the sculpture limit what could happen there? Deutsche does not pursue this line of inquiry but it is important to discuss. Images of Federal Plaza both with and without *Tilted Arc*, do not support the GSA's arguments. The sculpture's positioning within the plaza leaves ample room for concerts or ceremonies. Serra and his supporters unsuccessfully countered the "public use" argument by asserting that events on the site were infrequent, that the physical location of the sculpture did not preclude such events from happening in the future, and that the site as it was prior to the presence of *Tilted Arc* was so inhuman in scale that it was inappropriate for events. Art historian Douglas Crimp argues that Federal Plaza was never initially designed to support such events even prior to the presence of *Tilted Arc*.

The designers of the Federal Plaza managed to create a space that was inhuman in its scale, and in the way the wind whips through. The fountain could never be turned on because it would completely sweep the plaza with water...They were talking about how *Tilted Arc* prevented all these wonderful events from happening on the plaza, but we knew what bad faith that was. Have they organized public concerts in the plaza since?<sup>35</sup>

Crimp also argued in his hearing testimony and in later interviews that the GSA pushed the "use" vs. "sculpture" argument to develop a false sense of divisiveness between government workers and the artists who lived and worked in the neighborhood. "I believe that we have been polarized here in order that we not notice the real issue: the fact that our social experience is deliberately and drastically limited by our public officials."<sup>36</sup> Crimp goes on to argue that part of the merit of *Tilted Arc* is that it brought these issues to light. "I urge that we keep this wall in place and that we construct our social experience in relation it, that is, out of the sights of those who would conceive of social life as something to be feared, despised, and surveyed."<sup>37</sup> To Crimp, the extent to which a site is or is not public does not relate to a general acceptance of the aesthetics of its design, or to government designation. Crimp states, "The plaza is defined as it is



used<sup>g</sup> by a public. If a public takes over that space and holds political meetings or rock concerts, then it becomes public through that use.”<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps the more significant issue of these debates was not the question of whether the government had the authority to remove *Tilted Arc*, or whether or not Serra’s piece was “good public art”, or whether the space allowed for public events. Rather, as Deutsche argues that the debates showed how the GSA controlled public discourse and therefore public space through rhetoric. The GSA chose *not* to define “public” and “use.” Instead, they presented them as given and implicitly understood terms. To Deutsche public space is the *site* of democracy. To reiterate, it is not just that, because we live in a democratically based society that we should maintain openness in public space, but that public space *is* the democratic realm. It is the “place” where democracy happens. For this reason, rhetoric that seeks to define (implicitly or explicitly) who has a right to be in a public space by setting out appropriate uses for that space, limits democracy by limiting participation.

In addition to this fundamental question of the definitions of “public” and “space” there is another argument within Deutsche’s work that is directly related to politics and landscape architecture. Interestingly, it sits at a perceived division between “site specific public art,” and “new public art.”<sup>h</sup> Deutsche defines site specific art as having been developed to challenge the idea of art as an independent object with a fixed meaning. Site-specificity incorporated the “site” with the artwork to “reveal the ways in which the meaning of art is constituted in relation to its institutional frames...artists extended the notion of context to encompass the site’s symbolic, social, and political meanings as well as the discursive and historical circumstances within which artwork, spectator, and site are situated.”<sup>39</sup> Deutsche describes what she calls a “critical” approach in site specific art where the artwork not only addresses and calls attention to these aspects of its site, but also intervenes within it.

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<sup>g</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>h</sup> The conditionality of public space that Deutsche discusses, seems most closely related to the discussions of Robinson outlined in Chapter 1 regarding his reading of the picturesque.

[C]ritical site-specific art...not only continued to incorporate context as a critique of the artwork, but attempted to intervene in the site. The newly acknowledged reciprocity between artwork and site changed the identity of each, blurring the boundaries between them, and paved the way for art's participation in wider cultural and social practices. For public art, the objective of altering the site required that the urban space occupied by a work be understood, just as art and institutions had been, as socially constructed spaces.<sup>40</sup>

New public art, though less well defined, seems to refer to "art plus function." For Deutsche, new public art is problematic because it assumes a set of universal and incontestable functions. Furthermore, it strips art of its critical role and replaces it with a role that is palatable, and gives the illusion of integrating different people in the same space.

David Harvey (1985) relates the practice of creating spaces in cities that have apparent spatial and aesthetic cohesion with speculative development. For example, new high-income housing is imbued with a sense of having always been there by architectural styles and details that convey permanence. Harvey states, "[m]arket and land-rent allocation of this kind have already re-shaped many urban landscapes into new patterns of conformity."<sup>41</sup> The idea of permanence conceals the actual movement of capital in cities and the processes of gentrification. If a neighborhood appears to have "always been there," why ask questions about what it may have been previously? Including Harvey's analysis of the masking of the transfers of capital in cities within an analysis of the masking of social conflicts within the city, raises awareness of the danger of seeing design as somehow separate from society. Comparison of Deutsche and Harvey also expands the scale of the discussion. Harvey discusses the effects of architectural style and structure to entire cities, Deutsche discusses the effects of new public art within individual public spaces.

Within public spaces, new public art is seen as serving society by offering things such as benches, lighting, walls, floors, etc. In this way artists of the new public art see

themselves as putting people in front of self-expression. New public art conflates utility with social benefit in a moralistic way. New public art, Deutsche charges, presents an image of a unified and useful public realm closed off to criticism because of its moral correctness and appropriateness, it “present(s) as natural the conditions of the late-capitalist city into which it hopes to integrate us.”<sup>42</sup>

Central to the new public art, according to Deutsche, is not only the inclusion of “useful” features, but also the idea of spatial coherence. In discussing the GSA’s decision, and its misreading of the impetus behind site-specific art, Deutsche calls attention to site-specific art’s role in interrupting coherence.

But equating site-specific art with art that creates harmonious spatial totalities is so profoundly at odds with the impulse that historically motivated the development of site-specificity that it nearly amounts to a terminological abuse. For the invention of a new kind of artwork that neither diverts attention from nor merely decorates the spaces of its display emerged from the imperative to interrupt, rather than secure, the seeming coherence and closure of those spaces.<sup>43</sup>

New public art then acts to affirm rather than challenge or disrupt the space it occupies. In contrast, site-specific art seeks to call attention to the conflicts that produce space that are masked by this seeming coherence: “But proponents of a political site-specificity are sceptical about spatial coherence, viewing it not as an a priori condition subsequently disturbed by conflicts *in* space but as a fiction masking the conflicts that *produce* space.”<sup>44</sup> Deutsche quotes Henri Lefebvre, the urban theorist, and his description of how public space in a democracy is the site of contradiction. To Lefebvre, there is a struggle within “late capitalist” public space. It is: “simultaneously the birthplace of contradictions, the milieu in which they are worked out and which they tear up, and, finally, the instrument which allows their suppression and *the substitution of an apparent coherence.*”<sup>45</sup>

Against this process, and in striking contrast to the GSA's notion of integration, site-specific works become part of their sites precisely by restructuring them, fostering – we might even say, restoring – the viewer's ability to apprehend the conflicts and indeterminacy repressed in the creation of supposedly coherent spatial totalities.<sup>46</sup>

How was *Tilted Arc* site specific? Deutsche does not go into detail on the qualities of *Tilted Arc* that made it site specific, but Serra discussed this point in his hearing testimony. Serra and his supporters argued that removal of the sculpture was tantamount to destruction because *Tilted Arc* was a site-specific work. “The specificity of site-oriented works means that they are conceived for, dependent upon, and inseparable from their location.” Serra noted that at Federal Plaza the sun moved across the plaza in the same direction as the workers moved into the adjacent Federal Building. He laid-out the sculpture “so that there would be no shadows from the sculpture at midday...thus maximiz[ing] the sculptural condition when some people gather in the plaza.” Serra set up the arc's endpoints to mirror the curve of the plaza steps, “curve answering curve,” creating, “an amphitheatre-like space, where the steps could easily function as seats.” In elevation, the arc tilts at what would be eye level to workers or visitors as they exited building, “establishing a consciousness and condition of human scale.” Standing in the doorway, the height of the arc was set to appear similar to the height of the columns of the building and portals of the doorways: “thus connecting the framing of the building to the elevation of the sculpture.”<sup>47</sup>

While Serra and his supporters emphasized the site-specific nature of *Tilted Arc* in arguing the impossibility of relocation, they downplayed the sculpture's aggressive character. Serra intentionally designed *Tilted Arc* to be massive and imposing.

It is necessary to work in opposition to the constraints of the context, so that the work cannot be read as an affirmation of questionable ideologies and political power. I am not interested in art as an affirmation or complicity.<sup>48</sup>



It is not only ironic but also an indication of Serra's ability to create forceful works that Re and Diamond acted on their ideologies and exercised their political power to destroy *Tilted Arc*. While Deutsche speaks generally in favour of "The Destruction of *Tilted Arc*: Documents," she criticizes the editors and Serra himself for not raising the issue of who the subjects of democratic public space are and what constitutes use. Similarly, these discussions were not taken up in descriptions of Federal Plaza's redesign by landscape architect Martha Schwartz. The second section of Chapter 4 attempts to draw the questions raised regarding definitions of "public" and "use" in this new physical context.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Case 2 involved an examination of a critical work in which the concept of avant-garde plays no significant role. What this case does discuss is the relationships between politics, critical discourse, public art, and public space. Why are these differences between the two cases important? Firstly, the second case carries forward questions raised by the first case, namely, what are the relationships between politics and public space and why are they important. Secondly, the idea of criticism as fundamental to a discipline is indirectly raised in this case. The article itself is not solely based on a discussion of a particular project. Rather, it includes discussion of the project, controversies and issues surrounding this project, and larger social questions raised as a result. Also, several important definitions are explored in this article, in particular definitions of terms including democracy, public, and use. To be sure, the absence of discussion around these definitions is of primary concern to this article.

This chapter represents a turning point in the thesis. Just as the selection of works on the avant-garde presented in the previous chapter direct a reading of the potential for an avant-gardist criticism in landscape architecture towards an understanding of politics and public space, the two case studies analysed in this chapter provide examples of what some of the relationships between public space and politics are. Certainly they represent two very different approaches on many different levels.

While Meyer focuses on formalistic aspects of landscape architecture in making a judgment of Alphand's work in Paris as avant-garde, while not discussing any of the politics surrounding the project, Deutsche makes almost no mention of *Tilted Arc*'s form and talks mainly about the political questions which surrounded the larger debate of the work's presence in Federal Plaza.

However, both works were instrumental to the development of criteria for an avant-gardist criticism in landscape architecture, which will be set out in Chapter 5. This critical approach will be discussed in the context of a final case study, presented as a kind of test-run of how the criteria might be employed. The project that will be examined in this case is the "new public art" project which went on to replace Serra's *Tilted Arc*. Continuing the discussion "on-site" is important for several reasons. First, groundwork for understanding the context into which Schwartz's project was inserted has been set in the work of Deutsche. Second, the presence of this theoretical/political context enables the critique to explore methods of historical materialism, using the site's past and present as co-illuminators much like Benjamin posed his critique of the Paris Arcades in the materialist setting of their past and present. And finally, Schwartz and her work sit astride the formalistic avant-garde of landscape architecture and the perceived junction between landscape architecture and art. Her project at Federal Plaza can be examined according to Deutsche's conception of the new public art.

It must also be clarified that this thesis does not support the addition of politically avant-garde design processes to the existing structure of the landscape history canon. A similar discussion regarding the presence of women in landscape history texts may serve as a way forward. Norman Newton's *Design on the Land* has been frequently criticized for including only one female designer in a 700 page book stretching in scope from 1500 B.C. to the present day. In addressing this omission, Heath Massey Schenker suggests that we should not simply seek out female designers to add to Newton's narrative. "As Pollock (1988) has noted, arguments over inclusion in the canon reduce art history to an exercise in art *appreciation*, ignoring the complexity of historical circumstances that produce any work of art."<sup>49</sup> Instead Massey Schenker

suggests<sup>50</sup> that we should open landscape architectural history to allow questions about how landscape architecture affected women's lives.

Feminist history can effect a new understanding of intricately interrelated cultural discourses, ideologies about the family, and sexuality that have shaped the designed landscape. The goal of landscape design history should be a full understanding of the cultural, political, social, and psychological determinants that shape a particular landscape design at a particular historical moment. Feminist interventions in the history of landscape design can propel us towards that level of understanding, can lead the way to a critical re-examination of the way we think of history.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, we should not simply seek examples of a politically avant-garde design process for inclusion in the canon of landscape architectural history. Instead, by trying to understand all design in political terms - not just those which espouse to be political - we can reveal the implicit political nature of design. This is not to say that a search for examples of landscape architecture as political rupture should not happen, but in doing so we must be prepared to look beyond the traditional realm of the field. This point, that an approach to criticism has a significant impact on a discipline, is important to this thesis. Also important is the point that the politically avant-gardist approach to criticism proposed in this thesis works not by examining only works considered to be avant-gardist, but by examining all works from the understanding that criticism can focus attention on social/political agendas, outcomes, and misinterpretations in both built work and theoretical work. Certainly the case of Parc des Buttes Chaumont reveals what crucial information is left out, and perhaps unseen, when a critical approach based on the "art-for-art's sake" definition of the avant-garde is employed. It also raises questions surrounding the relative importance of political analysis versus formalistic analysis of landscape architecture, in particular as it relates to public space.

It is important to note how the transition from Case 1 to Case 2 is important to the thesis. Case 1 represents a discussion of the way in which the idea of the avant-

garde, as a critical tool, reveals and conceals certain kinds of information based on the way in which it is defined. Through the case of Parc des Buttes Chaumont, it was argued that the information missed by an art-for-art's sake definition of the avant-garde, namely, the information on the social political goals of the design rather than the formalistic goals of the design, was crucial to an understanding of the importance of this park in the history of landscape architecture. It was also argued that while seeking examples of avant-gardist work for critique from the canon of landscape architecture would be of historical interest, it may be more important to understand all works of landscape architecture from a social/political perspective. The example of a feminist approach to history was discussed to shed light on this idea.

These examinations, and the questions raised within them, can help in the development of a new critical approach: a political avant-gardist criticism in landscape architecture. The mechanism and goals of this approach will be laid out in the following chapter but, first, a distinction must be made between a criticism which focuses on understanding whether or not a work is politically avant-gardist and a mode of criticism which is itself politically avant-gardist. The two cases aid in the development of this approach in the following way: each supports the need for a critical practice within landscape architecture that examines the issue of politics and the development of public space by illustrating what information is acknowledged or missed when politics is or is not directly addressed.

If, as Deutsche and Crimp argue, unquestioned definitions of terms “public” and “use” can be used to control discourse about public space, this is of great importance to landscape architecture. It underlines the fact that public space is both physical and rhetorical. Rhetoric can be used to control who is and who is not part of the public. Rhetoric can claim incontestable uses that exclude groups and individuals. If you are not there for the concert, why are you in the space? If you are not part of the ceremony, why are you in the space? Not contained within Deutsche's or Crimp's statements but related to both is the argument that while a landscape architect might design a space that has the flexibility to support varied uses, that offers physical



accessibility, that provides spaces that can be temporarily co-opted by different individuals and groups, that same site can be made inaccessible by determinations of what constitutes appropriate “use.” While *Tilted Arc* itself has been removed, and with it the physical locus for what might have been an ongoing debate about public art and public space, the documents and images remain.

Criticism was central to the history of *Tilted Arc*. Serra created a sculpture that criticized political power. Hearing participants developed critical strategies to argue against Re and Diamond’s actions. Crimp and Deutsche developed standpoints on the role of public art and public space based on the critical appraisal of the sculpture and the rhetoric surrounding its destruction. The next iteration of Federal Plaza and its history constitute an additional set of critical responses to the site.

But what about the avant-garde? Is it a “red-herring” at this point in the thesis? Should the idea of the avant-garde be replaced with the idea of a social/political critique sans the avant-garde label? Has it served its function in drawing attention to the need for political content in landscape architectural criticism and the limitations of a formalistic approach? Or is there something important about the avant-garde that is worth salvaging. In the following chapter, it will be asked whether or not it is worth carrying forward the label of the avant-garde for the proposed critical practice. It will be argued that there are benefits to employing the term as argued by Buck-Morss and Debord. The mechanics of this critical practice will also be tested out in an additional case study.

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<sup>11</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 386.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Meyer, “The Public Park as Avant-Garde (Landscape) Architecture: A Comparative Interpretation of Two Parisian Parks, Parc de la Villette (1983-1990) and Parc des Buttes-Chaumont (1864-1867),” *Landscape Journal* 10, no. 1 (1991): 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Minnesota Press, 1998), xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Meyer, 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Heath Massey Schenker, “Parks and Politics During the Second Empire in Paris,” *Landscape Journal* 14, no. 2 (1995): 202.

<sup>10</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, selected and trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 76.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Massey Schenker, 216.

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- <sup>13</sup> Meyer, 20.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 20-21.
- <sup>15</sup> Pers com, Komara, Ann, November 1998.
- <sup>16</sup> Retrieved June 1, 2000 from the World Wide Web:  
[http://www.napoleon.org/us/us\\_ci/iti/parcs/alphand.html](http://www.napoleon.org/us/us_ci/iti/parcs/alphand.html)
- <sup>17</sup> Heath Massey Schenker, course notes, University of California at Davis. Retrieved June 15, 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://lda.ucdavis.edu/courses/classsites/30s99/parks/4.30.html>
- <sup>18</sup> Meyer, 19.
- <sup>19</sup> Massey Schenker, 204.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 205.
- <sup>21</sup> Buck-Morss, 89-90.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 90.
- <sup>23</sup> Meyer, 23.
- <sup>24</sup> Cosgrove, 199.
- <sup>25</sup> Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994), 424.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 407-408.
- <sup>27</sup> Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk, ed., *The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991), 23.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 38.
- <sup>29</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998), 257-258.258-259.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 58.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 263.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 259.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 272.
- <sup>35</sup> Tom Finkelpearl, "Interview: Douglas Crimp on Tilted Arc," in *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 74.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Deutsche, 61.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Harvey, 1990, 77.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 66.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 261.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 262.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Weyergraf-Serra and Buskirk, 223.
- <sup>48</sup> Finkelpearl, 61.
- <sup>49</sup> Heath Massey Schenker, "Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Landscape Architecture," *Landscape Journal* (1994): 109.
- <sup>50</sup> Schenker cites Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
- <sup>51</sup> Massey Schenker, "Feminist Interventions," 112.

## CHAPTER 4: TOWARDS A POLITICALLY AVANT-GARDIST CRITICISM IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

So where, then, can real change come from?...The exploration of contradictions always lies at the heart of original thought. But it is also evident that the expression of such contradictions in the form of objective and materialized crises plays a key role in breaking the powerful link ‘between the subjective structures and the objective structures’ and thereby lay the groundwork for a critique that ‘brings the undiscussed into discussion and the unformulated into formulation.’<sup>1</sup>

This chapter proposes an approach to a politically avant-gardist criticism for landscape architecture based on the concept of historical materialism. In the first section of the chapter, the elements of this proposed practice are presented and discussed. In the second section of the chapter, the approach is tested-out in a critical discussion of Federal Plaza in New York City. But first, three questions must be answered. Why propose an avant-garde for the criticism of landscape architecture and not the practice of landscape architecture? Why retain the concept of the avant-garde at all? Why pair historical materialism with the avant-garde?

An avant-gardist criticism is proposed as a necessary step towards an avant-gardist practice. Without first bringing the “undiscussed into discussion” within the discipline of landscape architecture the need for a change in practice will be unsubstantiated. It has been noted in this thesis, and illustrated in Chapter 2, that little work is being done within landscape architecture to understand the ways in which projects implicitly or explicitly relate to larger political issues. Researchers in other fields are building critical and theoretical arguments relating politics to landscapes, but even these studies are relatively unknown within the landscape architectural

academic community. In order to make a case for including such works in landscape architectural education, critical work that illustrates the connections between the practice of landscape architecture and issues such as gentrification, the role of public space in democratic society, and commercialisation of the built environment, for example, must be constructed and presented. Perhaps part of the reason that landscape architecture has been so late in accepting works that emphasize the role of the built environment in politics and economics is that this recognition implicates the designer and their client. Landscape architects do not, as a generally rule, instigate projects. Rather, they are hired to provide design and planning services. On large-scale projects these clients are often government agencies, real estate developers or private corporations. A real estate client doesn't want the design firm that they hired to lecture them on the evils of gentrification! For this reason criticism that carefully reveals the contradictions inherent in landscape architecture must begin the process of mapping out new roles for practice.

Why retain the title of avant-garde for this method of criticism? There are issues raised within the concept of the avant-garde that are important to landscape architecture. These issues point to specific challenges in developing a political approach to landscape architectural discourse and practice. These issues also point to the potential for recreating the concept of the avant-garde outside the institution of fine arts. In Chapter 1 several definitions of avant-garde were presented. Those that projected a future for the avant-garde, specifically Guy Debord and Susan Buck-Morss made compelling arguments for the potential of the avant-gardist work to act as an instigator of social change. Both saw the avant-garde as a powerful tool for drawing attention to political issues. Burger, Debord, and Benjamin, to varying degrees, asked how art could become part of daily life. In a sense, landscape architecture is already a practice directly tied to daily life. The work of landscape architects: streets, sidewalks, parks, plazas, and communities, *is the material setting of daily life* and the material expression of particular sets of values. For this reason,



landscape architecture offers potentials for re-opening the avant-garde and the possibility of eventually uniting the avant-garde with material practice.

Why pair the avant-garde with the concept of historical materialism?

Historical materialism exposes the connections between the material world of the present and past with culture, economics and politics. Historical materialism brings the avant-garde in contact with the material world, increasing the potential for the avant-garde to have an impact on society and decreasing the potential for the avant-garde to drift back into the realm of aesthetics. What historical materialism is and how it works will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

### **Section 1: What are the basic elements of the proposed critical practice?**

The proposed approach is based on the concept of historical materialism, as described by Walter Benjamin and Susan Buck-Morss. It is important to discuss the differences between the historical materialism of Benjamin and the historical materialism of Karl Marx. Though Benjamin's approach was based on Marx's work, the differences between the two are fundamental. For both Marx and Benjamin, historical materialism was a way of understanding history through material life. For Marx, material life, culture, and history were determined by a society's mode of production. Marx saw a superstructure of economics on which culture rests, dismissing the impact of culture in reinforcing and/or altering economics.

Denis Cosgrove describes the Marxist idea of production as the "particular way in which humans come together socially to produce their individual and collective existence. A mode of production is above all a theoretical description of a set of economic and cultural relations."<sup>2</sup> As an example of a mode of production, Cosgrove offers the following description of pure market capitalism, "the model states that all production and the social relations relating to it are geared towards commodities bought and sold in a market where value is determined solely in the act

of exchange by the meeting of supply and demand.”<sup>3</sup> Cosgrove points out that the relationship between culture and mode of production is more complex.

Like Cosgrove, Benjamin argues that culture is not simply built on a foundation of mode of production. Indeed, for Benjamin, this *must* not be the case. Otherwise, cultural practices like writing, painting, art and rhetoric, would have no power to change society. If the past of history is built upon the foundation of capitalism, for instance, resistance is powerless. Benjamin employs the concept of historical materialism to break the perception of history as a continuum. Benjamin’s concept of historical materialism begins from a relationship between mode of production and culture where each influence and are influenced by the other. From this position Benjamin proposes cultural practices, specifically criticism, that can expose these relationships and propose alternatives.

As a critical process, Benjamin’s concept of historical materialism is at once simple and complex. It involves presenting images and ideas to “illuminate”<sup>4</sup> an issue of importance in the present. Benjamin developed historical materialism as a critical response to fascism and capital. Certainly, as a Jew, living in Europe during the rise of Hitler, the immediacy of the political danger to which Benjamin sought to “awaken”<sup>5</sup> people cannot be overemphasized. Benjamin’s historical materialism relates to the avant-garde in that, like Debord, Benjamin saw the power of aesthetic practice in drawing attention to current political circumstances.

## **1 Examine the work in light of something that is at stake in the present.**

This is crucial to both Benjamin and Buck-Morss. A critical work must begin with an understanding of something that is at stake in the present. Buck-Morss offers the following quotation from Benjamin to describe the relationship between past and present in the dialectical constellation. “The events surrounding the historian and in which he takes part [in the present] will underlie his presentation [of the past] like a

text written in invisible ink.”<sup>6</sup> What does this mean? What was at stake for Benjamin was the combination of capital and fascism in Europe prior to WWII. Benjamin’s work reveals that there is not a *causal* relationship between capitalism and democracy: “free” economic systems do not guarantee “free” political systems. As an example, Benjamin examined the Paris of Napoleon III, which combined a consumption-based economy with a fascist political system. An example of what might be “at stake” for a different critic is the issue of gun control or abortion rights. In landscape architecture, the issues that are currently “at stake” are broad. They include issues relating to development of land, management of natural resources, the political nature of such things as “business improvement districts” and “home owners associations,” how access to and use of public spaces is determined by design, how civil liberties like Freedom of Speech and Assembly are upheld in public spaces, etc.

## **2 Expose the politics, implicit and explicit, in the work.**

The goal of the historical materialist is to “break open history,” to “brush it against the grain”<sup>7</sup> in order to expose underlying political issues. For Benjamin and Buck-Morss, politics has to do with the related issues of power, capital, and control. An assertion of this thesis is that landscape architectural discourse must address politics. The profession of landscape architecture is broadly defined. In the U.S., Landscape architects are involved in making decisions about resource management, real estate development, public housing projects, national parks and forests management, and public space design. For each of these areas there are a number of political issues at work. Here are just a few: What decisions, regarding natural resource management are made privately, either by government or private interests that should be opened up to more public discussion? How are issues of racial and economic segregation addressed by public housing initiatives? How is money for public space allocated in urban neighborhoods? What conflicts arise when private/public partnerships fund public spaces? Exposing these issues within practice

is difficult. It would require criticizing the goals and objectives of the government agency or private concern that hired the landscape architect. While designers are trained to question the brief presented to them by the client, this questioning is usually limited to aspects of the physical layout or ideas about the project's visual appearance.

### **3      Employ the concept of the dialectic and the dialectical image/idea.**

A dialectic is a presentation of two poles of meaning<sup>a</sup>. We can imagine the dialectic as a tool for opening up discussions where previously meaning was closed off. A simple example of a dialectic might be public vs. private or dream vs. waking. The poles of the dialectic create a framework on which a constellation of ideas or images can be brought together. The key to historical materialism is how these constellations shed light on present issues.<sup>b</sup>

Benjamin's constellations are complex and difficult to describe. For example, Benjamin sets up the dialectic of Mythic History vs. Natural History. How are these ideas dialectic? Benjamin describes mythic history as the false notion that social history represents progress. Mythic history for Benjamin had "great[est] political danger"<sup>8</sup> because it implies that humans are powerless to influence or interfere in their world. It negates the "moral and political responsibility of people as conscious agents to shape their own destiny."<sup>9</sup> At the time Benjamin was writing, the idea of social Darwinism, that society evolved and progressed ever *forward* in a manner similar to

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<sup>a</sup> There is a distinction between the way Benjamin employs a dialectic vs. the way in which Hegel employs a dialectic. According to Buck-Morss, for Benjamin the dialectic between poles of meaning does not imply a movement towards *resolution* of these poles. Rather, Benjamin's dialectic is a static *structure* on which are hung the images and ideas that form a constellation.

<sup>b</sup> "Benjamin perceived historical nature as an expression of truth's essential transitoriness in its contradictory extremes - as extinction and death on the one hand, and as creative potential and the possibility for change on the other...not only nature, but all the categories in Benjamin's theoretical constructions have more than one meaning and value, making it possible for them to enter into various conceptual constellations."<sup>b</sup>



the progress of species and the progress of industrial processes, was broadly argued. Benjamin sought to debunk this idea. While species may evolve and improve capacities for survival and reproduction and technology may evolve and improve mechanical capacities for production, Benjamin argued that there was nothing to say that social relations improved over time. Benjamin set mythic history, or the false sense of progress seen in historicism, against natural history and evolution.

Like Marx, Benjamin argued against the Hegelian idea that history is the “unfolding” of truth or the Spirit in time. But unlike Marx, Benjamin did not substitute “Spirit” with an equally deterministic force like “economics.” For Benjamin it was crucial that history *not* be determined. Benjamin used the idea of the dialectic and constellations to draw attention to that very fact. If history is determined, change is not possible. Benjamin believed that society existed in a dream-state manufactured by what Debord was to call the spectacle. The goal of the historical materialist was to waken people to the falseness of the spectacle. Buck-Morss describes Benjamin’s understanding of the historical materialist method.

Dialectical images as “critical constellations” of past and present are at the center of materialist pedagogy. Short-circuiting the bourgeois historical-literary apparatus, they pass down a tradition of *discontinuity* [emphasis hers]. If all historical continuity is composed of those “rough and jagged places” at which the continuity of a tradition breaks down, the objects reveal “cracks” providing “a hold for anyone wishing to get beyond these points.”<sup>10</sup>

In the dialectical image, the past of a particular epoch[...] appears before the eyes of [...a particular present epoch] in which humanity, rubbing its eyes, recognizes precisely this dream *as* a dream.

On the framework of the dialectic, the historical materialist sets up a constellation of images or text from the past or present. For example, Benjamin



**Figure 24.** Passage Choiseul, Paris.

Benjamin juxtaposed images in order to bring out specific ideas. By juxtaposing this Paris arcade during its peak with an image from its decline, Benjamin draws attention to the way in which consumption is driven by fashion. The “latest fashion” quickly becomes out of date, drawing people into consumer culture.

*Susan Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997) 4, 41.*

sought to reveal how Parisians were drawn further and further in to a commodity-based society by fashion. He felt that the mythic element of the “always new” needed to be set against the natural, or reality element, which was that “nothing really changed.” He showed images of the Paris arcades at their highpoint, full of well-dressed people and the newest goods, set against the empty arcades, filled with dusty, out of date items.

Such juxtapositions of past and present undercut the contemporary phantasmagoria, bringing to consciousness the rapid half-life of the utopian element in commodities and the relentless repetition of their form of betrayal: the same promise, the same disappointment.<sup>11</sup>

Benjamin’s point was not one of nostalgia for the good old days of the arcades, but that the boulevards, the new seat of consumption developed during the Second Empire, had nothing new about them at all. They would some day be as outmoded as the arcades had become. The promise of the new that consumerism was based upon was false.

#### **4 Avoid historicism.**

One of the main goals of the historical materialist approach is to avoid historicism. Both Benjamin and Buck-Morss argue that the problems of historicism are political. Historicism here refers to the idea that social history builds upon itself leading to higher and higher levels of social achievement. In the historicist model, cultures and ideas that predate the present time are considered less advanced. This model becomes even more problematic when the question of who is actually writing history is asked.

Benjamin describes history as the story of the “winners.” This means that history is a series of stories told from the vantage point of the victors. Historic monuments, palaces, great art works, and museums themselves were constructed and

promoted by whoever was in possession of capital. The story of the losers is untold. The losers have no access to the money or power needed to write and promote their version of events. The loser's cultural artefacts are either destroyed or co-opted by the winners.<sup>12</sup>

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment...<sup>13</sup>

This quotation was important to present again here because it implies a very particular stance towards the built works of landscape architecture we study. Generally speaking, the costs of building a new public space, or other large scale landscape architectural projects, are such that they can be seen as examples of “cultural treasures” as Benjamin writes, or as physical evidence of the “winners.” This is a difficult point to discuss within a field that, especially in its public work, prides itself on its social commitment. However, it is also because of this espoused commitment that, as a field, landscape architecture must be specific in what the shortcomings and dangers of this work are. This is not to say that conversations regarding the social effects of public works are not happening in landscape architectural practices and classrooms. However, these discussions must be part of an open, ongoing, focused debate.

## **5 Practice critical salvage.**

Because of the employment of the dialectic and the use of constellations of images and ideas, which, as we have discussed, allows for breaks and shifts in meaning, there is an opportunity in this critical process to “salvage” historic elements. This is one of the most important yet conceptually difficult elements of Benjamin's



and Buck-Morss' work to describe. At its most basic, salvage of historical material happens because it is part of the new constellation. It becomes part of a process that Benjamin sees as redemptive. "The purpose of a materialist education is to provide this political experience... to 'shake off' those cultural treasures that are 'piled high up on humanity's back' – 'so as to get its hands on them.'"<sup>14</sup> This description offers the idea of salvage as the ability to break elements out of "historic continuity" in order to understand them as political artefacts that are important to the present. Salvage occurs when historic material is used to "re-open" a discussion. In landscape architectural history this might involve examining places that are part of the "canon" of design history, like Central Park in New York, in terms of their complex social history. The standard explanation of what the site was like prior to development as a park was that it was a wasteland waiting to be improved. However, entire settlements, including the African American settlement of Seneca Village were present on the site.<sup>15</sup> Even images and ideas that were part of a negative event in history, when used to illuminate questions in the present, become constructive rather than destructive forces. A salvage of the suburbs, or the urban renewal practices of the 60s and 70s might be possible in landscape architectural discourse. For example, were their social programs or architectural approaches ones that, in a different physical or social context, might prove successful? The image of Pruitt Igo, the modernist housing tower in St. Louis, being blown-up is presented in classes on urban design as an example of the failure of modernism to help the poor. But what about the social programming that was meant to be part of this development? Was Pruitt Igo a failure on strictly architectural grounds? If so, why do high rise buildings occupied by the wealthy, so called "door-man" buildings, seem to work?

## **Section 2: Case Study: Federal Plaza, New York City**

The following case study serves as an opportunity for testing-out the proposed critical structure against a work of landscape architecture. Federal Plaza was the site

of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*. After its removal, Martha Schwartz was commissioned by the General Services Administration to redesign the space. At this point, the plaza was renamed Jacob Javits Plaza. By looking at the continued history of the space itself, including Serra's piece and its subsequent removal, we are able to employ an historical materialist criticism in a clearly bounded manner, as it relates to one particular site and the issues surrounding its physical changes.

## 1 What Is at Stake in the Present?

As outlined in Section 1 of this chapter, the proposed critical approach must begin with the identification of what issues in the present are in need of examination. I would argue that what is at stake is the question of the control of public space in cities. For example, in New York City, under the administration of Mayor Rudolf W. Giuliani<sup>c</sup>, in particular, city government has repeatedly acted to prevent certain groups and certain activities from occurring in places like parks, streets, sidewalks, and plazas. These attempts have led in some cases to litigation regarding the Freedom of Speech Act. Here are a few examples:

- NYC Mayor Giuliani and Police Commissioner Howard Safir<sup>d</sup> ordered the placement of police surveillance cameras in public spaces including Washington Square Park with no public debate. While the cameras have been installed to deter drug-dealing and may serve to provide evidence against suspects, they also record lawful behaviour of all park users. Questions surrounding the potential for improper monitoring of individuals must be asked, as should the need for public debate on such measures before they are enacted.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>c</sup> 1993-present.

<sup>d</sup> Appointed by Giuliani in 1996.

- Under the quality-of-life initiative, Mayor Giuliani ordered that homeless people be ticketed or often arrested for offences such as obstructing sidewalks and sleeping in parks. “Downtown revitalization programs or business improvement plans often include park curfews and ordinances popularly known as quality-of-life laws that make sleeping, lying, and sometimes, sitting and standing, in public, offences punishable by jail...advocates for the poor say many communities are spending more energy and resources on plans to police and prosecute the down and out as quality-of-life offenders than on tackling the causes of homelessness.”<sup>17</sup>
- While groups such as those involved in Aids Awareness and Civil Liberties have been forced to comply with a rule declared by Mayor Giuliani that no more than 30 people at a time may assemble on the steps of City Hall, the same rule has not been applied by the Mayor to groups such as an awards ceremony for fire-fighters or for a Yankees baseball pitcher. Giuliani said that he enacted the rule to maintain the flow of pedestrians through the space. Giuliani has been involved in cases of litigation involving the Freedom of Speech Act and public spaces many times.<sup>18</sup>

## **2 Expose the politics implicit and explicit in the work.**

The political issues that are important to the discussion of Federal Plaza cluster around the following question: How do the definitions of terms like “the public,” and “use,” employed by public officials, developers, critics, and designers, include or exclude certain groups or individuals? This question is particularly important to landscape architecture since these terms are basic to landscape architectural discourse. Without an understanding of the politics at work in the design

and management of public spaces, we may unwittingly support projects that prevent access and use of urban spaces and or limit civil liberties.<sup>e</sup>

### **3. Employ the concept of the dialectic and the dialectical image/idea.**

The dialectical frameworks of this discussion are public vs. private, use vs. function, and contestable/open vs. incontestable/closed. Against these related dialectics a set of ideas and built landscapes form a constellation. These include: Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, the discussions surrounding its removal, Martha Schwartz's Jacob Javits Plaza, and its characterization as "criticism" within landscape architecture.

#### **Jacob Javits Plaza and the "use" of public space**

In her article, "*Tilted Arc* and the Uses of Democracy," (1998) Rosalyn Deutsche maintains that the testimony presented during the *Tilted Arc* hearings, reveals the ways in which the terms "public" and "use" were deployed in the defence of the sculpture's removal. Deutsche argues that central to the hearing debates was an argument that the physical presence of *Tilted Arc* prevented "public use" of Federal Plaza. *Tilted Arc* was removed from the site in 1987. In 1992, the GSA hired Martha Schwartz to redesign the plaza. At this time the site was renamed "Jacob Javits Plaza," for the former U.S. Senator. Art critics like Deutsche and Douglas Crimp who were so vocal during the *Tilted Arc* hearings have not responded to the site's redesign. Landscape Architectural critics and historians have written about Schwartz's work, but not in the critical context set out by Deutsche and Crimp.

Schwartz's design and the critical rhetoric surrounding it ignored issues regarding public space raised in the debates over *Tilted Arc*. Articles on Jacob Javits

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<sup>e</sup> For example, freedom of speech, assembly, and privacy.





**Figure 25.** View from Federal Building exit of Jacob Javits Plaza by Martha Schwartz.

*Kristine Miller, November 2000.*

Plaza found in *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, *New York Times*, *New Yorker*, the *Martha Schwartz Spacemaker Press Monograph*, *Land Forum*, contained rhetoric similar to that used by the GSA in their testimony against *Tilted Arc*, stating that the presence of *Tilted Arc* precluded any other use of the space. Similarly, art and landscape architecture critic John Beardsley described Schwartz's work as follows: "There is no question about the fact that Schwartz has designed a more user-friendly space than Serra's; she has replaced metaphors of conflict with those of leisure."<sup>19</sup> And while Beardsley states that he regretted that Schwartz's design completely erased from the site any indication of *Tilted Arc* he added, "I suppose it's reasonable to put a limit on the debate - as Schwartz says, "We've picked that scab long enough. It's time to move on."<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps more important than leaving a physical marker indicating the prior presence of the work would have been for Schwartz's work to critically examine the debates about publicness raised in the production and construction of Serra's sculpture. Instead, Schwartz's plaza gave permanent form to a GSA approved definition of public and appropriate use. Articles on Schwartz's company website, in *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, the *SpaceMaker Press* edition on Schwartz's work and the *Land Forum Magazine* carry forward false, misleading or uncritical readings of the site's contentious history. The questions regarding how public and use are defined or deployed as uncovered by Deutsche and Crimp are buried again.

A particular concept carried forward in writing about Jacob Javits Plaza was that Serra's work interfered with public use of the site. This assertion is found in every source examined including descriptions of the plaza as part of an announcement of the three awards Schwartz received for the re-design. "Whatever the inherent merits of *Tilted Arc*, its location on the plaza was both a visual and physical obstruction for pedestrians and its presence effectively precluded any other use of the space."<sup>21</sup>

The brief description of Jacob Javits Plaza by Martha Schwartz, included with photographs and a plan published in the monograph *Martha Schwarz: Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, includes a reference to *Tilted Arc* and reiterates the idea that the sculpture was removed because it conflicted with the site's use.

This time around the people who would use the plaza were invited to join in the design process: Schwartz interviewed potential users before submitting a final design...At first I was outraged...but I came to feel sorry for those who had to use the space...she developed what she called 'an antithetical sort of piece. I would shape the space for the way people actually use it: to eat lunch.'<sup>22</sup>

In the "in-between time," when *Tilted Arc* had been removed and the space had not yet been redeveloped,

...workers in the federal office building placed temporary benches and planters across the plaza. Nevertheless, the same dreary conditions to which Serra had so strongly responded prevailed...the building demonstrated the prevailing modernist site-planning wisdom of placing a tower in a large featureless plaza. Trees were seen as competing forms that might hinder views of the building, so the plaza was not designed to support them.<sup>23</sup>

The image of workers, setting out picnic tables after *Tilted Arc* was removed is powerful. It crystallizes the idea of people choosing what to do with their own space. It reflects the designer's and critic's apparent sensitivity to the will, so to speak, of the people. It almost sets the workers up as co-designers, certainly as the framers of what use the plaza will be developed for. The Spacemaker Press monograph on Schwartz<sup>f</sup>

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<sup>f</sup> Meyers, Elizabeth, "Transfiguration of the commonplace," in *Martha Schwarz: Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, ed. Heide Landecker (Washington, DC: Spacemaker Press, 1997), 5-10.

indicates a particular set of users and uses that the plaza was designed to accommodate. Actually, only one use is described: “Because the plaza is in the heart of Manhattan’s civic district, it is liveliest during the weekday lunch hour.”<sup>24</sup> Weekday lunchtime is the only programmed use that is mentioned.

The double strands of back-to-back benches loop back and forth and allow for a variety of seating-intimate circles for groups and flat outside curves for those who wish to lunch alone...Familiar lunchtime paraphernalia-blue enameled drinking fountains, Central Park light stands, and orange wire-mesh trash cans-occupy the surface.<sup>25</sup>

Schwartz’s design gave physical form to the GSA’s conception of an appropriate public and appropriate use: office workers eating lunch. However, landscape architecture critics including Clare Cooper-Marcus have questioned how successful Schwartz was in doing even this. In her letter published in *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, titled “Statement vs. Design,” Cooper-Marcus charged that Schwartz’s plaza fell short of its goal of providing space to eat lunch. Cooper-Marcus cited too much seating, inappropriate scale of the seating arcs for intimate gathering, and the empty look of the site.

Endless swirling back-to-back benches set in mauve concrete with orange trash containers – is that that kind of space in which you would want to eat lunch? Is this the kind of setting where someone working under fluorescent light bulbs in front of a computer screen in an air-conditioned office would want to go to relax...a perusal of William Whyte’s *Social Life of Small Urban Places*...would suggest to the designer and her clients that “eating lunch” has many, many more subtle design implications than merely providing endless benches and eye-catching trash containers.<sup>26</sup>





**Figure 26.** Jacob Javits Plaza, by Martha Schwartz. Schwartz created unique design elements like curving benches and elongated light posts.

*Kristine Miller, November 2000.*

In defence of her design, Martha Schwartz focused on the fact that the “public” was consulted in the process; they asked for and got lots of seating; the mist from the green hills counted as a water feature as advocated by William Whyte;<sup>8</sup> and that artistic design is needed in public space.

Whether or not it is a pleasant place to eat lunch, the “public” of Jacob Javits plaza should include more than lunchtime office workers. In addition to housing the GSA, the Federal Building also houses offices including Social Security, Immigration and Naturalization (INS), and the New York District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Because of these offices there is a high amount of traffic through the plaza. Donald Crimp points out that while the *Tilted Arc* hearings referred to two sets of “publics” namely, the office workers, and the artists who lived in loft spaces in Tribeca, that “there is another group on the site every day that outnumber either of these groups: people from all over New York who need a green card, a new driver’s license, who must meet a court date, or serve on jury duty.”<sup>27</sup> Crimp’s point is emphasized in a set of news articles that further enlarge the site’s “public,” for example: people forced to spend the night on the sidewalk next to the plaza to line up for appointments at INS<sup>28</sup>, and the 10-20,000 demonstrators who marched from Brooklyn to federal plaza to protest police brutality.<sup>29</sup> Schwartz does not discuss these as possible uses for the space and the space was not designed to accommodate them.

The dominance of the physical objects within the site limits what can happen there. There is simply no room for even GSA-approved uses of ceremonies and concerts. Serra’s sculpture occupied less of the plaza than the re-design. Similarly, there is not enough room for events such as large-scale government demonstrations and protests. In this way, the physical layout and the design elements of Jacob Javits Plaza constrain who can use the plaza and for what purpose.

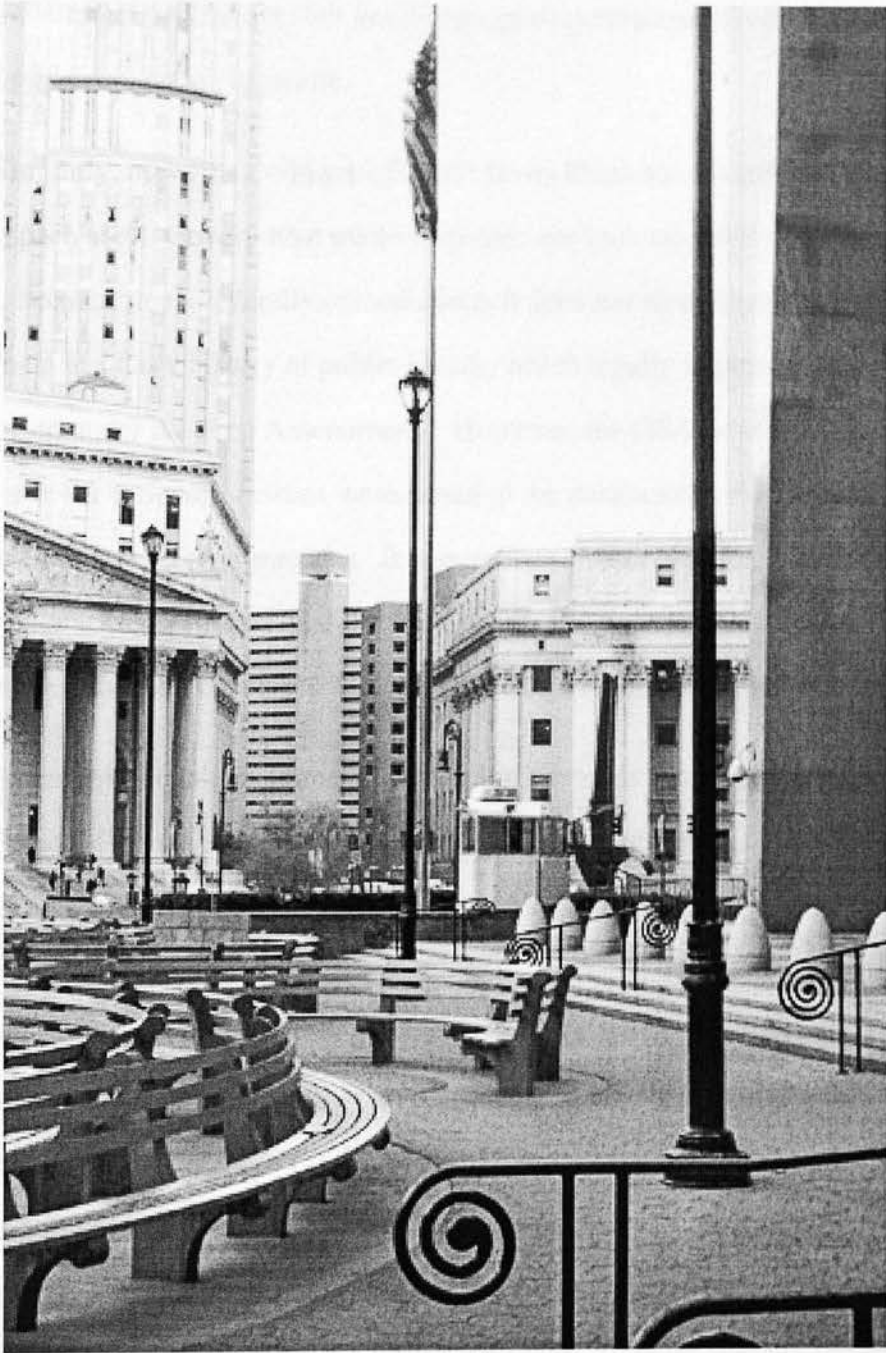
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<sup>8</sup> Author of *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. 1980.

The irony of this point is that the reason for the repetition and oversized forms of the benches and other furnishings that crowd the space is that *they are Schwartz's critical commentary on public space*. Schwartz's work is broadly considered to be at the cutting edge of the field of landscape architecture because her *design* work can also be interpreted as *critical* work. What does the design of Jacob Javits Plaza critique? Martha Schwartz Inc. promotional material, the ASLA Award write-up, and an article by Elizabeth Meyers state that the design for Jacob Javits Plaza addresses the difficulty of designing a public space in New York,

...where contemporary urban landscape design can be reduced to selecting stock items from the Parks Department's list of appropriate materials...Schwartz is adopting another strategy for objectifying the public realm... Playing by the rules, Schwartz's design proposal for the Jacob Javits plaza includes, in her words, 'traditional New York Park elements with a humorous twist.'...These elements (the trash cans, light standards, benches and other 'lunchtime paraphernalia) offer a critique of the art of landscape in New York City, where the ghost of Frederick Law Olmsted is too great a force for even New York to exorcise...Javits Plaza is therefore a recognizable park, historic and acceptable to New Yorkers, but its familiar elements have all gone a little mad.<sup>30</sup>

The relevance of this critique on this site must be questioned. How important is criticism of street furnishings compared to the discussions of public space raised by the *Tilted Arc* debates? Schwartz offers Jacob Javits Plaza as a kind of wry joke about the difficulty of designing in a city that places so much emphasis on an historic *style* of design. "I was tweaking New York City's nose... After *Tilted Arc*, I just wanted to give people a nice plaza to eat lunch."<sup>31</sup> However, this issue seems of little importance given the plaza's complex and controversial recent history. On a site that is managed less as a public space, and more as a controlled ante-chamber to the Federal Building,



**Figure 27.** One of the building's security booths.

*Kristine Miller, November 2000.*



the site's "appearance" of publicness is troubling. Schwartz has not only chosen a insubstantial target for critique, but *her design gives permanent physical form to the GSA's limited conception of public.*

Similarly, no written critique of Jacob Javits Plaza has asked whether it is now a public space at all. Government ownership does not indicate public ownership. That is to say, because it is a federally owned space, it does not mean that it is a public space. The plaza has a history of public access, which legally indicates that it is a public forum under the First Amendment.<sup>h</sup> However, the GSA does not currently manage it as such. Security issues were raised in the destruction of *Tilted Arc* and guide current management practices. It is important to note that the *Tilted Arc* controversies where issues of security were raised, and Schwartz's redesign of the plaza both pre-date the Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing in April 1995.

Attempting to take pictures of the site itself reveals the complications of calling Federal Plaza a public space at all. Security workers routinely ask those taking pictures, to stop or have their cameras confiscated.<sup>i</sup> In order to spend any amount of time photographing on the site, one must enter the building through the security checkpoint and report to the building manager's office. There one fills out a form requesting to hold a special event, or art exhibition on the site (requiring this permit is, according to the New York Civil Liberties Union, illegal). The Schwartz design, her conception of who the public of the site is, all reinforces a very controlled and GSA prescribed definition of public space. Fred Kent, President of the Project for Public Spaces, Inc. quoted one plaza visitor who said, "You get a feeling of alienation in here. You are being watched."

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<sup>h</sup> Pers com, Christopher Dunn, New York Civil Liberties Union, November 2000.

<sup>i</sup> This was even after saying that no images would be taken of the building.

APPLICATION FOR PERMIT TO TAKE PICTURES IN PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND GROUNDS			3090-0044	
INSTRUCTIONS: Please submit with this application a copy, sample, or description of any material or item proposed for distribution or display. Type or print in ink all items. Failure to complete this form shall result in denial of a permit.				
PART I - APPLICATION				
1A. FIRST, MIDDLE, LAST NAME OF APPLICANT <i>Kristine F MILLER</i>		1B. COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS <i>616 LINCOLN AVE ST. PAUL, MINN 55102</i>		
1C. TELEPHONE NUMBER <i>651 292 8137</i>				
2A. NAME OF PERSON OR ORGANIZATION SPONSORING, PROMOTING, OR CONDUCTING THE PROPOSED ACTIVITY <i>University of Minnesota</i>		2B. COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS <i>UNIVERSITY AVE SE Landscape Architecture Minneapolis, MN 55414</i>		
2C. TELEPHONE NUMBER <i>612 626 6000</i>				
3A. NAME(S) OF PERSON(S) WHO WILL HAVE SUPERVISION OVER AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PROPOSED ACTIVITY		3B. COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS		
3C. TELEPHONE NUMBER				
4. DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTIVITY <i>TAKING PICTURES OF PLAZA DESIGNED BY MARTHA SCHWARTZ</i>				
5. PROPOSED BUILDING AND AREA <i>JACOB JAVITS PLAZA</i>				
6. PROPOSED DATES AND HOURS DURING WHICH THE ACTIVITY IS TO BE CARRIED OUT				7. APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF PERSONS TO BE ENGAGED IN THIS ACTIVITY (If known)
A. FROM <i>1:00 11/15</i>	B. TO <i>4:30 11/15</i>	C. HOURS <i>3.5</i>		<i>1</i>
IMPORTANT: If applicant purports to represent an organization, a letter or other documentation that the applicant has authority to represent that organization is required to be submitted with this form.				
B. APPLICANTS PROPOSING TO ENGAGE IN THE SOLICITATION OF FUNDS MUST CHECK ONE OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS:				
I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT:				
<input type="checkbox"/> A. I represent and will be soliciting funds for the sole benefit of a religion or religious group;				
<input type="checkbox"/> B. My organization has received an official Internal Revenue Service (IRS) ruling or letter of determination stating that the organization or its parent organization qualifies for tax-exempt status under 26 U.S.C. 501 (c)(3), (c)(4), or (c)(5); or				
<input type="checkbox"/> C. My organization has applied to the IRS for a determination of tax-exempt status under 26 U.S.C. 501 (c)(3), (c)(4), or (c)(5), and that the IRS has not yet issued a final administrative ruling or determination of such status.				
CERTIFICATION: I CERTIFY that the above information is true and correct.				
9. SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT <i>Kristine Miller</i>			10. DATE SIGNED <i>NOV 15, 2000</i>	
PART II - PERMIT (TO BE COMPLETED ONLY BY GSA)				
11. DESIGNATED BUILDING AND AREA AND ACTUAL DATES AND HOURS FOR WHICH ACTIVITY IS APPROVED				
A. BUILDING AND AREA <i>REAL PLAZA</i>	B. FROM <i>11-15-2000</i>	C. TO <i>11-15-2000</i>	D. HOURS <i>4:00hr</i>	
12. SIGNATURE OF GSA APPROVING OFFICIAL <i>[Signature]</i>			13. DATE SIGNED <i>11/15/2000</i>	
GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION		(See Reverse)		GSA FORM 3453 (12-80)

**Figure 28.** GSA permit required for on-site photography at Jacobs Javits Plaza. *Kristine Miller, November 2000.*

While security may seem an incontestable concern, Crimp points out that the GSA has used this issue in defending its control of the plaza. The GSA, Crimp argues, used the issue of security in the same way it used the issue of aesthetics: to divide and distract. In the case of security, the GSA is constructing an “other” that is dangerous to the “real” public. “I would submit it is we – the public – who are on the other side of the wall, and it is we whom Judge Re so fears and despises that he wants that wall torn down in order that we may be properly subjected to surveillance.”<sup>32</sup>

While it is incorrect to say that certain physical forms lead to a public space, design can limit people’s ability to manipulate and take on a space as their own. Clare Cooper Marcus began to move toward this point, but never discussed the question of power. Deutsche begins her discussion from the question of power in public space, but discusses little about how this relates to form. Many factors can lead to decisions that limit public space. In the case of Federal Plaza those factors may have included a desire for greater control, personal dislike of a controversial artwork, and a desire for greater visibility of activities on the plaza. In other cases decisions may be based on greed, prejudice, or revenge.<sup>33</sup> “...[T]he William Diamonds of this world...want a shrinking public sphere. That’s where their power resides.”<sup>34</sup> As designers and critics our work must not unwittingly support the erosion of public space. It is crucial to understand the ways in which the physical and social public realms relate.

#### **4 Avoid Historicism**

Writing in landscape architectural publications on Martha Schwartz’s Jacob Javits Plaza indicated that Schwartz’s design was a vast improvement over Serra’s sculpture. There was a sense in these articles and awards statements that lessons were learned from the experience of Tilted Arc, that Schwartz carefully considered the history of the conflict, and that the resulting plaza design was therefore a success. It is startling on one hand and not surprising at all on the other that GSA constructed rhetoric about Tilted Arc was carried forward in a wholesale manner. It is startling

because of the number of different writers who *unquestioningly* put forward statements about how “unusable” the plaza was when *Tilted Arc* was present. Not just that the sculpture was unappealing to many people because it was made out of rusted metal, but that it made it impossible for the space to “function.” It is not surprising because many of the articles were written for professional journals or by bodies that had an interest in praising Schwartz’s project. Professional journals for landscape architects were able to promote a high profile designer as “saving the day” where an artist had failed. Of course a landscape architect can provide a better public space than an artist. That is what we are trained to do. Other writers seem to have simply taken the information about the plaza redesign from press releases written by the GSA or by Schwartz’s publicist. The GSA had an interest in promoting the “story of lessons learned and improvement” in order to put an end to what was an embarrassing chapter in the history of the Arts-in-Architecture Program.

## **5 Practice critical salvage.**

What has been “salvaged” in this discussion of Federal Plaza? First, the discussions surrounding the removal of *Tilted Arc* were salvaged from art history and used to understand a work of landscape architecture. Hearing testimony from art historians like Douglas Crimp, ignored in descriptions of Schwartz’s plaza, were used as part of a critical constellation that examined issues of politics and public space. Also, the following issues within landscape architecture have been pulled to the foreground for further discussion:

- Terms such as “the public,” though commonly considered within landscape architecture to have an agreed upon, common sense meaning, can instead be deployed to exclude individuals and groups.



- Planning for a certain set of “uses” can be used as a way to include and exclude individuals and groups.
- While design work can act as a kind of criticism, there are much larger issues at work in public space than purely aesthetic or self-referential issues.
- Even if a public space is designed to support a variety of uses, the way in which the space is managed can dictate who is there and what is done.
- Government owned does not equal publicly accessible.
- Landscape architecture has the potential for consciously acting to support or negate decisions about public space if there is an awareness of the kinds of issues that are at play.
- Criticism can be used to map out the relationships among design, politics and public space.

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<sup>1</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), 345.

<sup>2</sup> Cosgrove, 1984, 39.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 288.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 256.

<sup>14</sup> Buck-Morss, 1997, 289.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Blackmar and Roy Rosenzweig, “Central Park,” Kenneth T. Jackson, ed. *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Ed., “Police Cameras in the Park,” *New York Times*, February 9, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Nieves, Evelyn, “Prosperity’s Losers: A special report.; Homeless Defy Cities’ Drives to Move Them.” *New York Times*, December 7, 1999..

<sup>18</sup> Sachs, Susan. Guiliani’s Goal of Civil City Runs Into First Amendment. *New York Times*. July 6, 1998.

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- <sup>19</sup> John Beardsley, "The Haunting of Federal Plaza," *Landscape Architecture Magazine* May 1996: 159.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> "Landscape Architecture Design Honor Awards," *Landscape Architecture Magazine*. (1997): 40-75.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Meyers, Elizabeth, "Transfiguration of the commonplace," in *Martha Schwarz: Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, ed. Heide Landecker (Washington, DC: Spacemaker Press, 1997), 69.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Clare Cooper-Marcus, "Statement vs. Design," *Landscape Architecture Magazine*. November 1996:
- <sup>27</sup> Tom Finkelpearl, "Interview: Douglas Crimp on *Tilted Arc*," in *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 63.
- <sup>28</sup> Ying Chan, The INS Waiting Game, *New York Daily News*. July 16, 1995.
- <sup>29</sup> Austin Fenner, Marchers Flood Downtown 10,000 Protest Cop Slaying of African Vendor. *New York Times*. April 16, 1999.
- <sup>30</sup> Meyers, Elizabeth, "Transfiguration of the commonplace," in *Martha Schwarz: Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, ed. Heide Landecker (Washington, DC: Spacemaker Press, 1997), 5-10.
- <sup>31</sup> Karrie Jacobs, "Que Serra, Serra," *New York Magazine*, January 20, 1997.
- <sup>32</sup> Weyergraf, 75.
- <sup>33</sup> Sachs, Susan. "Guiliani's Goal of Civil City Runs Into First Amendment." *New York Times*. July 6, 1998.
- <sup>34</sup> Crimp, 75.

## CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

### Summary

As practitioners...often we must accept boundaries for action that do not allow for significant social or physical change. Yet we recognize that each inclusion and exclusion is a non innocent decision but has significant political and ethical ramifications. We must have the courage to know what we are not doing as well as what we are able to do.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis divides into three main sections. The first examines the multiple definitions of the term avant-garde both in the fine arts and in landscape architecture. The second explores the potential for a politically avant-gardist criticism in landscape architecture through two case studies. This critical approach is the necessary precursor to a politically avant-garde practice. The third outlines and tests-out the critical approach on a work of contemporary landscape architecture.

A number of pertinent issues were raised through this work.

1. Landscape architecture is *both* a material practice, and a critical discourse. Without criticism, practice continues unquestioned. Without practice, discourse remains divorced from the material world.
2. There are important ideas about the concept of avant-garde that are relevant to landscape architecture. A re-interpretation of the different roles for the avant-garde into landscape architecture provides an interesting model; a landscape that challenges aesthetic issues in its medium; a landscape that challenges the discipline of landscape architecture; a landscape that challenges social and

political systems; and a landscape or *practice* that challenges these systems and seeks to offer alternatives.

3. Practitioners, theorists and educators in landscape architecture are not discussing or practising with this approach to the avant-garde. While some discourse on the avant-garde in the discipline's esteemed journals and texts connected the idea of an avant-garde with broader social but most often ecological issues, the predominant definition of avant-garde used indicated a designer who broke with formal traditions within the practice of landscape architecture.
4. Landscape architects are not trained in undergraduate or graduate programs to identify the social and political effects of their work. The requirements and challenges to build a professional practice based on a political avant-garde in a discipline where we are hired to perform services for clients are great. Government agencies, private developers and individual clients, when challenged about their goals, may seek a less adversarial practice. For example, urban design courses rarely address the issue of gentrification and the political, economic and cultural consequences. The barriers - pedagogic, social, and institutional - must be overcome to include this kind of discussion in the classroom to prepare future landscape architects to be able to understand how they can also remove 'barriers' in practice.
5. There is a great potential for landscape architecture to expose the politics, economics and culture that relate to changes in the landscape. Many of these issues are exposed within the design process.
6. The challenges to moving practice in this direction cannot be underestimated. Landscape architecture has great potential for bridging the divide that Debord recognized between daily life and the rhetoric of political change. Because we are



situated within a capitalist society that was or is based on land and its value, there is much resistance to this exposure.

7. Part of the challenge to understanding the potential for a political avant-garde in landscape architecture is that the design process is not recognized within both education and the profession as political. From brief development, inventory and analysis through management of the built work there are a variety of implicit and explicit socio-political choices at work. For example:
  1. Development of the brief. During the early development of a project proposal a set of particular questions may be asked. Firstly, who determined the need for a particular project? Did the need come from the private or public sector? If from the private section, what reasons for project development are present? Does the project represent an opportunity for private gain? Is the project part of a bargaining system between the private sector and government? Can a monetary unit be placed upon the gains of each side, public and private? Who, specifically, gains from the development of the project? Is it local residents? Is it a particular subset of residents, for example property owners vs. renters? Do local residents have access to the project? Does it serve existing local needs?
  2. Program development. Who is involved in the development of the program? Are parties who are meant to gain from the project involved? What is the level of their involvement? Is their involvement sought at a time when their ideas can have an impact? Who is accountable for making sure that the desires and needs of the public are met in a given project? Who is accountable for monitoring the

level and quality of public involvement? What public is encouraged to be involved? How are they informed about the project? Do they have access to decision-making information? Are there conflicts between what is most useful to the public and what is most useful to private sector participants? How are these conflicts handled?

3. Site inventory and analysis. What is considered as important information on which to base design decisions? Again, who is involved in the planning process? How is information gathered? Who are considered the main users of the space? What conditions, environmental, social, economic, etc. are considered as important for study? What methods are employed in the information gathering and analysis phase? This portion of the design process, generally thought to be the most “objective” is often the point at which basis for a particular set of choices is justified. It is, therefore, important to be considered in a social/political light.
4. Design development. How is the information in the site inventory and analysis phase, and the needs of involved parties, reflected in the design development phase? At what stages are reviews held? Who is involved? How do choices made in this phase impact future uses of the site? Who is accountable for making sure that negotiations during this phase continue?
5. Management. Once a project is designed and built, how is it managed? Who has access to the site? Who is responsible for its maintenance and operation? How are future changes to the site handled? How, if the private sector is involved, are things like public access, monitored?

Who is kept out of the site? Under what circumstances? What codes of conduct will be developed for the site? How will they be enforced?

Will there be security cameras? Private security guards?

These are just a few examples of the design decision-making process and how attention of a politically avant-gardist criticism could expose the potential for a politically avant-gardist practice. As stated, the barriers to this kind of practice are not easily surmounted. This is particularly the case in a capitalist society where landscape architects work to improve property values for their clients. Continuing to build a discipline and practice with little understanding of its political and social impacts is unthinkable. We are not “powerless to change” these conditions. As David Harvey states, this would be a “cavalier” response. But these changes require a redrawing of the boundaries of the discipline and practice of landscape architecture.

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Schneekloth and Robert Shibley, *Placemaking: The Art and Practice of Building Communities* (New York: Wiley and Sons), 16.

# Glossary

## **Aesthetic**

In this thesis, the term aesthetic refers to a design's physical appearance: this idea will be important as it is contrasted with the ideas of function and use. It must be noted, however, that other definitions of aesthetic are of importance to the discussion of politics and the landscape. In particular, the work of Susan Buck-Morss, who in an article titled "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered,"<sup>1</sup> sets out a political potential for aesthetics and art against merely politicised or propagandic art. Based on an interpretation of Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay: Buck-Morss describes this radical relationship among aesthetics, art and politics: "'Aesthetics' [emphasis hers] would be transformed, indeed, redeemed, so that, ironically (or dialectically), *it* [emphasis hers] would describe the field in which the antidote to fascism is deployed as a political response." (Buck-Morss, 1992: 5).

## **Formal**

Formal is used in this thesis to indicate the designed physical qualities of a built landscape. For example, the formal qualities of a park include the patterns of its circulation system, the way in which the architectural elements are organized, the ways in which the spaces are shaped by plant material, etc. This use of the term should not be confused with the distinction between formal and informal – a structured garden vs. a meadow.



## **Politics**

This term is broadly defined here to include competition between groups or individuals for power, space, control and/or economic wealth, and the consequences of that competition. The politics relating to the design of public space might include a real estate owner's desire to increase property values, neighborhood residents claims for access to a recreational resource, a city official's goals of limiting access to homeless individuals and teens, a preservation group's desire to only allow the reconstruction of historically "accurate" features.

## **Public Space**

In this thesis, public space is distinct from both 'public sphere' and 'public realm,' which Jürgen Habermas<sup>2</sup> refers to a part of social life when individuals discuss 'the common good', but which could occur in a private location. While public sphere and public realm do not refer to an actual physical location, public space does. But it should be noted that some of the problems with Habermas' account of the public sphere, as indicated by theorists including Nancy Fraser<sup>3</sup>, such as whether or not there is a common good to discuss, are intimately related to this discussion.

## **Use vs. function**

Function is the way in which a designer or manager configures a particular space based on a program of desired activities. Use is the way in which people actually engage with a particular space, either in keeping with, or different from the way in which it was designed to function.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October*, Fall 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Bürger (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, Bruce Robbins ed., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1-32.

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