

theme issue autumn 2012

JoLA

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Ethics / Aesthetics





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Aesthetics are rarely explicitly addressed in conjunction with ethics in the body of literature examining recent landscape architectural research. This seems strange given that, if ‘ecology’ is added to ‘aesthetics’ and ‘ethics’, the classic tripartite definition of the discipline is formulated, and most would agree that this constitutes the unique significance and substance of what we do.

The papers in this, the first of a new series of themed JoLA issues, grew out of and developed from conference papers presented to the ECLAS Sheffield conference Ethics/Aesthetics in 2011. When conference organizers Catherine Dee and Anna Jorgensen initially chose the theme, they were concerned not only with the dearth of studies examining the detailed workings of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in landscape practice, but also with more elusive landscape theory that was perhaps being pursued from solely an aesthetic or an ethical perspective.

The content, review and selection process for this journal issue differed substantially from our normal editorial practice. For example, we called for shorter papers of 3,000 words so that we could include a wider spectrum of academic approaches than is normally possible in a single JoLA issue. The graphic design of the issue is also different. Furthermore, unlike our normal process, reviewing was carried out solely by the editors, with Anna Jorgensen as guest editor. Fifty-three papers were submitted and were each initially double-blind reviewed by two editors. Admittedly, the process lacked the usual rigour of content-based expertise that usually accompanies the JoLA peer-review process; however, through discussion among all editors we arrived at a final nine papers for inclusion. The authors were then invited to consider revisions following editors’ feedback. Under the Sky has two papers: Walliss, and Sheridan and McMenammin, and the Thinking Eye is from Georges Descombes who was a keynote speaker at the ECLAS conference. Ken Worpole’s essay, based on his conference keynote, is also included. The book reviews also follow the issue theme and include both editors’ short reviews and the usual longer invited reviews. Given this experimental editorial and reviewing approach for JoLA, we are interested to hear from you, how you find this issue and whether you think it is a model worth continuing.

The apparent neglect of research that explicitly addresses aesthetics and ethics together may have several reasons. One aspect is that research paradigms as well as conventions for working in professional practice will typically narrow the focus and therefore the methodologies of study or practice. Though often challenged, such crude divisions appear to persist and obstruct the critical development of landscape architectural praxis at all levels. The integrative breadth of landscape architecture is hard to formulate within narrow research and disciplinary specialisms, so when these limitations are overcome landscape theory takes a leap forward.

Another aspect contributing to the neglect of detailed aesthetic studies may be the lack of a tradition of philosophical discourse in landscape architecture, coupled with the fact that aesthetics as method, construct, practice, experience and the means toward critical judgement is notoriously hard to define with any rigour. The difficulty in both defining and conveying accurately the nature and significance of aesthetic experience, and in addition the elusiveness of aesthetic judgement and its tendency to go with the flow of contemporary politics, social taste and cultural transitions, often means that aesthetics are conveyed tangentially and metaphorically, and sometimes not at all. Many academics are deterred from such intangible topics and tacit approaches, especially the younger in the pursuit of PhDs to whom natural and social science appear to offer greater rigour because they are more amenable to explicit forms of knowledge.

One of the most coherent aspects of the ethics/aesthetics relationship to emerge in this issue is the tension between ideal, utopian aesthetics—often those of a professional or political elite—and the physical and social actuality of landscapes lived. It seems that utopian and ideal aesthetics will often lead to unethical actions and forms for landscape through a neglect of the real. At the same, the essays gathered here also indicate that aesthetic knowledge and practice do indeed have enduring characteristics.

In her Under the Sky essay, Jillian Walliss tackles through case study one of the classic schisms between ethics and aesthetics in a political context by addressing the apparent aesthetic neutrality of planning, arguing that this must be overcome if political interference in the articulation of design is to be resisted. Walliss illustrates her argument with the competition for and realization of Barangaroo Headland Park, Sydney, Australia. She concludes that, in order to be able to withstand political and ideological interference, planning should be equipped with criteria that go beyond the merely functional.

Ken Worpole shows how authentic and meaningful aesthetics of place come from the embedded histories of use, with all their mess, impermanence, resilience, unexpectedness and interwoven complexity. He traces the concept of Englishness in post-war Britain in the tidal flatlands of Essex. Worpole dwells on the unique culture of walkable landscapes, drawing attention to the democracy of walking also implied in the new London Green Grid. Themes of defence and freedom thread through his essay as metaphors and as descriptions of functioning landscape, and perhaps it is in these two terms that something of the specific relations of ethics to aesthetics in the Essex landscape is found.

Bruno Notteboom illustrates the difficulty of marrying a social agenda with a particular aesthetic, revealing how the early modern Belgian Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque association had a clear social programme relating to the promotion of garden art amongst the working classes, but never fully succeeded in finding an appropriate aesthetic expression to match the early social ideals.

Eva Gustavsson investigates some of the inadequacies in the modernist legacy of structuralist and quantitative analysis of landscape aesthetics. Examining how post-structuralist and post-modern approaches to aesthetics have begun to provide alternative frameworks, she also highlights the pitfalls and limitations of some of this work especially in relation to the use of ‘narrative’. Gustavsson posits an approach based on the philosophical work of Croce and others, which begins to address ‘meaning’, where landscapes and their aesthetics (and therefore ethics) are dialectically constructed through ‘expressioning’.

Elissa Rosenberg uses archival analysis to investigate the aesthetic of Samuel Bickels, whose landscape design attempted both to give form and expression to the social and cultural ideals of the Kibbutz movement and settlements from the 1930s through the 1970s. In particular she illustrates how such landscape architecture framed and situated residential buildings and therefore the Kibbutz community within the seeming wilderness of the desert landscape. Rosenberg’s analysis explores how landscape architectural aesthetics during the modern period were often driven by a perceived need to meet the shared social ideals of a community.

Providing a completely contrasting perspective, Naama Meishar goes straight to the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its legacy as manifested in the recently constructed Jaffa Slope Park. She underscores the paradoxes inherent in landscape architecture despite re-presentations to work sensitively with past histories while creating tangible contemporary spaces. Meishar critically interprets the park and its evolution through the lens of the cultural ‘Other’, as posited by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, and concludes that in the Jaffa Slope Park the landscape architecture constitutes a profound, ongoing ethical dilemma.

In the other Under the Sky essay in this issue, Dougal Sheridan and Deirdre McMenammin focus on a close reading of particular cases of Ireland’s vernacular agricultural buildings and structures in their landscape context. They focus on the ways in which these settlements both constitute and facilitate a resourceful and unique interaction with a challenging terrain, based on what the authors call ‘the intimacy of necessity’; they explore aesthetic practice as an engagement with a specific place and in so doing challenge a traditional scholarly view of vernacular architecture that tends to emphasize regional typology, stylistic variation and a detached aesthetic response to vernacular architecture as part of a view.

Stefan Darlan Boris demonstrates that locating aesthetics in mundane and messy everyday landscapes does not preclude utopian notions. Boris theorizes an innovative landscape architectural response to fragmented urban landscapes in Sletten, Denmark, where a forest was created as the setting for small-scale residential developments, with ‘collective zones’ that residents appropriate for their own use. The paper highlights the difference between the passive consumption of landscapes, characteristic of much contemporary experience, and the modest interventions of the forest gardeners.

In their aesthetic choices regarding the shaping of the forest, the gardeners must adopt an active ethics of care towards their everyday surroundings.

Georges Descombes’s Thinking Eye employs his notebook drawings. Revealing something of an ethics of design process, the drawings chart a preliminary study and dialogue within a landscape context, and the arrival at a significant, attuned response, by teasing out the landscape conditions and testing a repertoire of possible scenarios. The ethics of such notation on paper comes in the dialogue, which sensitizes the designer to the unique and particular conditions of place and to the multitude of possible responses, one of which will eventually arise as being more subtle or alive than the other propositions.

Katie Kingery-Page and Howard Hahn diagnose the kitsch that arises in ‘super-real’ digital renderings of landscape when the medium is used uncritically. Employing Tomas Kulka’s definition of kitsch as ‘triggering an unreflective emotional response’ which ‘does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes’, the authors help to clarify why recent digital representations fail to communicate meaningfully. They suggest that kitsch results from a lack of clear intentions on the part of landscape architects and, more importantly, that unreflective digital rendering sidesteps visual abstraction as a necessary part of intentional representation. From this diagnosis they offer a prescription for an antidote.

Studying the moral agendas associated with modern and post-modern cultural movements, and using the *acceptera* manifesto as a sharp example of the ethical position functional modernists were keen to promote, Maria Hellström Reimer determines that (the) aesthetics (of landscape) have often been limited and constrained by such attempts to form, to fix and to attach specific ethics to cultural practices. Following Ranciere and Welsch, she proposes that aesthetics—as the formation of constantly changing culture—have their own implicit ethics, which resist expedient institutional and political morals, and therefore stand independent of the need for ethical underpinning.

Taken together, the papers in this themed issue suggest that an aesthetics for today is one that is constituted through the acknowledgement of reality: the physical actuality, specificity and impermanence of every place. While aesthetic ideals will continue to be sought and formulated, it is only where they encounter the real that they stand or fall. If there is any conclusion to be drawn from these collected essays, it is perhaps that the practice of aesthetics is always ethical practice.

Bernadette Blanchon-Caillot / Catherine Dee / Anna Jorgensen
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