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Static and dynamic

Change in architecture and landscape architecture

Contemporary architectural discourse seems dominated by largely unbuilt projects said to be concerned with process, dynamism, unpredictability, self-organisation, flexibility...'change' generally. At the same time, the general media is dominated by the notion of change: changing oneself through diet, through lotteries, through education and personal development, or securing oneself against change through insurance or superannuation. James Gleick in Fastersuggests a technology driven acceleration of 'stuff' in our lives, and contra-indicatively, a 'slow' movement has also developed to combat this intensity, most notably in slow food. This is also present in architecture, in the reactionary return to the drawing as a legacy technology, after the computer takeover. Thinking about the last 300 years, or even history generally, time has always been the continuum in which people have lived their lives and change is the most obvious manifestation of time. Because our lives are so 'now', it must be part of the human condition to become increasingly preoccupied with change as we age. Thinking about this preoccupation with change in architecture, perhaps there is no real acceleration of change, but rather the access that computers have given us to represent change in different media seems to give the designer the ability of 'engaging' it.

For landscape architecture, the notion and term 'change' is fundamental to the definition of the discipline, and is often cited as its raison d'être. In the postwar period in English-speaking landscape architecture texts, there are three main contexts in which this pivotal role of change in landscape architecture is discussed: its design palette of changeable things, its connection to a changing landscape and its apparent dynamism in contrast to a static architecture.

The palette argument goes that, because landscape architecture has grown out of gardening (via a circuitous route) its basic materiality comprises things that change, most obviously plant material. Both the qualities and form of plants change as they grow: they are different now than they will be at maturity. This argument is fundamentally materialistic. After noting this 'changeability' of the material (plants), the use of that material tends to be substituted into an architectonic formal surface. This view was articulated with sophistication by modernist American landscape architect James Rose. This view of change sees a tree as a regularly growing tree circle on the page, rather than an organism transforming over its life, which may be chaotic and varied, and plagued by catastrophes.

In terms of a rhetoric of change for landscape architecture, the work of Ian McHarg, in Design with Nature established an analogous model for landscape architecture, on the basis of its name. Because landscape architecture is named after the landscape, its agency stems from the characteristics of the landscape. In other words, its scope is whatever the landscape is. In this view, it is because the landscape changes over time that landscape architects are involved with change. McHarg's methods of overlay mapping were basically centred on the organising system of catchment and geomorphology. On this scale, intervals of change tend toward increments of 10,000 years (excluding catastrophes). While this view lends landscape architecture a grey haired wisdom, it also enforces a humbleness, a sense that nothing a designer does will ever be truly seen in the scale of geomorphological time. Invest in the future, and accept an immediate future of near invisibility. Most usefully, this view created a literacy and sensitivity to the nature and the productiveness of natural processes, both of which are vital to any real engagement with change through design.

The final argument, discussed by Michael Laurie, does not so much define landscape architecture directly in terms of change, but rather defines architecture as unchangeable. Architecture is defined as solid, unmoving, static – bricks and mortar. Its basic condition is one of control and minimisation of change, in the face of inevitable degradation. Time negates architecture. On the other hand,

landscape architecture is defined as flexible, dynamic, comprising processes and an inherent fluidity. The palette argument is also used to support this argument.

The work of James Corner and his protégés, particularly the 'emergent' landscape urbanism, is actively interested in change, and either revealing, engaging or using it in design projects. This landscape discourse is more closely tied to architectural design culture than to landscape architecture. Their methodologies arise from a reinvigoration of McHargian mapping, with different factors and processing methods, predominantly due to the possibilities of computers. The way that these processes are used is like the work from the 1980s/early 1990s by architects such as Eisenman, Libeskind and, most particularly, Koolhaas. This is coupled with the empirical certanty of McHarg. In seizing on the methodological rather than the cultural component of these design generation projects, much of what that period had to offer is lost. The contemporary language of process in both architecture and landscape architecture creates projects that are a result rather than an actual design proposition. This automaton-like design method has been developed, fine-tuned and finally turbo charged with better hardware and software and more uncritical 'wet-ware'.

All these methods use an analogy no more critical than that used when landscape architecture draws the characteristics of its namesake (landscape) to itself: a design generation process that utilises change will produce an outcome that is, somehow, more about change. What is produced, however, is simply a frozen moment of change that, even if it "displays unseen forces", or is generated from "the hidden processes at play in sites" is no more actually changeable than the drawings and sculptures of the Futurists. It is this quality of dynamism that is resulting in the built work from these generative processes rather than actual change. This work arises from frustration at the real static-ness of the architectural object, when in fact it may be its very static-ness and object-ness that makes it architecture itself. The real way that architecture regularly engages change is in its established and powerful role as a catalyst in the speculative development cycle. The Oxford English Dictionary defines change as "to render different, alter, transmute". In this context, change is physical transformation in time: literally one thing changing into another thing. Critical to this definition is the perceptibility of change, in increments that are perceivable by people. This does not necessarily mean that something changes as we watch it (although it can be this too), but rather that in increments we can notice, perhaps weeks, months or even a few years, the design object transforms, largely through its own changing nature. It is here that landscape architecture is definitely more able to work with change than architecture, because, notwithstanding the critique above, plants do grow and in growing change form, material quality and effect. This definition is very narrow and very literal; however, it is exactly this literality that is needed in this hypothetical debate.

The much-lauded Downsview Park competition saw most of the main competitors (notably Corner and Allen and the winning Mau-Koolhaas-Blaise entry) utilising the idea of self-organising landscapes that effectively built themselves through engaging the existing productivity of certain landscape processes. These schemes also sought to activate the productive potentials of site users, whether human, through circulation, or fauna, as part of the landscape process.Such an approach was what McHarg had in mind when he stated, "Ecology is not just an explanation, but a command." These projects still draw upon a now familiar map-based representational process to engage this change in design. This is more direct, but still not at the coalface of the small process interactions. These occur at a detail design scale, which will ultimately begin the turnover of the behemoth of the larger process. Much talk concerns the 'emergent' properties of complex systems; however, complexity theorists use small scale interactions to deduce the larger properties that will emerge. While landscape architecture looks to the design generation processes of architecture, ironically, gardening, its embarrassing cousin, probably offers the most immediate way of directly engaging the substance of change. It does this through the creation of conditions for plant regeneration and the use of maintenance to influence their process of change over time.

The type of productive system being discussed here is a wilderness or a wasteland, where things grow of their own volition. These types of spaces are spaces left alone, to do-what-they-do. They grow in relation to their own growth requirements, their characteristics and qualities, as well as their interactions with other interdependent characteristics of their specific sites. In such systems, plant material and fauna, in turn, also condition a site's characteristics. This ecological system will only work on the basis of the 'accuracy' of those very localised characteristics, regardless of what form generation process is used. The best research for doing this is coming out of the Netherlands, where the use of ecological systems has been the foundation for 'building' the whole landscape of the Dutch. In the UK, gardeners and horticulturalists, such as James Hitchmough, are looking at the 'wild garden', a contemporary version of an older fascination with wild-flower gardens. That most exemplars of this type of approach arise from Europe is not surprising considering that the aesthetic of landscapes is accepted to be practically a synthesis of culture and nature. It suggests that a cosmopolitan flora and cultural specificity is more important than evolutionary indigenous specificity.

In contrast, in the post-colonial condition of Australia and like countries, it is our liberated anxiety about losing the qualities of the pre-White Settlement environment that makes this approach difficult. We are hindered by our notion of 'the weed': the thing that does not belong. Weeds, however, regenerate 'naturally', on the basis of their own propensities and opportunism, and the qualities of all their ecological interactions. In a design approach concerned with kick-starting regeneration, determination of indigenous and non-indigenous is an irrelevant cultural overlay. The resultant regenerative success of a plant in an ecosystem will be because of its competitive success (that is, how it overcomes other plants, or works symbiotically with them) and its very weed-ness, even in indigenous species. Our ethical and aesthetic judgement about the incorrect 'look' of a non-indigenous regenerative ecosystem will forever affect our ability to have unaided ecosystems in our landscape spaces, whether in the city or the country. It is important to recognise here that this is a problem for professionals or amateur naturalists rather than for the general public, for whom 'greenness' is 'the goodness' in itself, regardless of its floristic constitution.

Of all the reasons why engaging 'change' is important, it is probably the environmental one that is most convincing. Less than 100 years after Einstein formulated his laws of thermodynamics there is a real limitation of energy sources. Energy here is expenditure of energy, whether a natural resource or even human labour. This has led to an attendant super-sensitivity to energy use, because energy costs money. Because of the cost-energy required, sustainability is a real limitation to the development of both the public and private spheres. Maintenance provision for designed landscapes is decreasing generally, both because of its inevitable recurrent cost, and its custodial and caring nature dissipating in the face of de-erson(plant)alising contractual provision. At the same time, because of the greenhouse effect, the actual requirement to plant more plants, and have a larger vegetative component of landscapes is very real.

Ironically, a consideration of maintenance in design projects leads generally to the use of plant material that does not exhibit much unpredictable change. The tree circle at planting and that at maturity is roughly a uniform cone of extrusion. The plant is 'selfcontrolling'. It is the opposite condition that is important, however, and just such a sense of 'control' that must be relinquished to meet the requirements of sustainability. The garden must grow itself, and keep growing. It will be a mess, but definitely not without qualities. To do this, a whole new aesthetic must be accepted, not so much by designers (who could easily be entranced by mess), but by the public and the various public institutions with landscapes in their remit. The notion of control is fundamental to their demonstrable activity in the landscape. Interestingly, while architecture is getting more and more high tech in its striving for solutions to sustainability, it is going to be an opposite strategy that is

required to deal with it this issue in landscape architecture – a relinquishment of control. In the context of Australia, where the notion of Terra Nullius was fundamental to claiming the territory by England, to accept a landscape as productive at the same time as being visually uncontrolled is tantamount to destabilising the whole rationale of that colonisation.