

Landscape Taste: a Globalised-vernacular Oxymoron

Shelley Egoz
Landscape Architecture Group
Environment, Society and Design Division
Lincoln University, New Zealand

Globalisation has been deemed responsible for a negative influence on landscape architecture in terms of a homogenising effect and the creation of “placelessness” (Frampton, 1983; Relph, 1981). Most critics of this lack of integrity caused by the transplanting of landscapes from one region to the other and “Disneyfication” of environments, have focused on urban spaces (e.g. Sorkin, 1992). The influence on rural landscapes has not caught much attention. Globalisation has also advanced a filtration of environmental ethics into landscape architecture. This paper addresses landscape taste in relationship to vernacular rural landscapes and environmental sustainability. The paper presents an example of influences of globalisation on landscape taste within a contemporary environmental paradigm. Such an examination of landscape taste is pertinent to the understanding of aesthetic decision-making process that landscape architects

engage in at every level. A case study of the influence of mainstreaming of organic farming in Canterbury, New Zealand, on landscape tastes, demonstrated how preferred landscape forms perform as a symbolic vehicle that represents worldviews and social relationships.

Farming landscapes are by definition vernacular; they are created in an integral manner and evolve within a defined locality. Yet, a globalised economy may drive agricultural landscape change to an extent that it becomes foreign to its surroundings and the oxymoron “globalised vernacular” landscape best describes that landscape type. Another paradoxical concept is the idea of taste and aesthetic preferences. “Taste” implies individual selection and preferences that are entirely personal. At the same time, taste is socially constructed and is often an ideal means for social distinction (Gronow, 1997). Landscape taste is therefore not only a matter of personal preference but a symbolic representation of ways of viewing the world (Greider and Garkovich, 1994) and shared landscape aesthetic preferences are constructs that express a culture or a “collective subjectivity” (Alasuutri, 1995, p.25).

The current environmental ethic is philosophically underpinned by ideas that ascribe a special value to nature. Nature is also a primary foundation of power and social value for landscape design (Olin, 1988) and how nature is spatially represented in design is a repository of culture (Spirn, 1997). The form through which landscape architects articulate design is thus a potent manifestation of both personal and social perceptions of nature. Historically, changes in styles of landscape design reflected society’s relationship to nature. At the same time, globalisation, in terms of transportation of landscape forms is not new; the history of landscape architecture has exemplified that the form and aesthetic appreciation of the designed landscape throughout the ages was transformed by outside forces. An obvious model is the Great Revolution in Taste that occurred in 18th century England. The type of aesthetic we call formal was no longer appreciated, and new, picturesque aesthetic values dominated by curvilinear natural-looking forms, drove dramatic changes in England. Those changes in a design language were, amongst others, expressions of emotional attitudes to nature shared by proponents of the Romantic movement; the revolutionary aesthetic became “globalised” when it diffused into other European countries and North America. Frederick Law Olmsted too, adopted a Kantian view on aesthetics, that “beautiful art must look like nature” (Kant cited in Grusin, 2004, p.37) thus a natural-looking, but “improved” nature-like picturesque landscape design was deemed beautiful.

These aesthetic conventions on beauty and nature became socialised and taken for granted in Western culture. Nature, and human attitudes towards it, are also at the core of 20th century environmental movement. Landscape architecture, nature and ecology are concepts that can no longer be seen as separated. Globalisation of landscape architecture, it could be argued, will eventually accelerate an ethic of ecological sustainability. In terms of existing globalised aesthetic conventions of nature, beauty, and landscape, however, the ecological paradigm presents challenges.

The paradox between ecological health and concepts of landscape beauty tied to perceptions of nature has been highlighted by an ethical debate amongst landscape architecture scholars known as the Ecological Aesthetic. While the prevailing nature-like picturesque aesthetic that emulated nature in many cases necessitated control mechanisms such as extensive chemical usage, environmentally friendly practices produced landscapes that looked unkempt and as such did not follow conventional notions of beautiful landscape. The adoption of an environmentally sustainable landscape design presented barriers to its wider acceptance (Rosenberg, 1986; Spirn, 1998; Crandell, 1986 & 1993; Howet, 1987 and Thayer, 1989, 1994 & 1998; Gobster, 1999;

Eaton, 1990 & 1997). In the context of the debate on an ecological aesthetic, the paper presents an example of influences of globalisation on landscape taste.

In the late 1990s and beginning of this century the look and form of a vernacular farming landscape in New Zealand was challenged by the introduction of organic farming. The case of organic agriculture and the landscape can be seen as a model that exemplifies the influence of ideas on landscape tastes and touches on current aesthetic debates. The paper is based on findings from a study (Egoz et al 2006) that compared landscape tastes of two farming subcultures; it illustrates how landscape appreciation embodies social meanings and interpretations of nature. Through this example landscape architects might gain insights into the ambiguities and complexities of landscape aesthetics, especially in this age of accelerated globalisation.

The two farming groups involved are: one which practised conventional agriculture that included the use of chemicals, and the other that was constrained by organic, non-chemical use land management. Historically, organic or biological farming practices in New Zealand were driven by ideology and philosophically motivated (Fairweather and Campbell, 1996). Culturally, those farmers shared a lifestyle and common attitudes. Their landscape preferences, like those of the international organic movement, were underpinned by a 'nature-like' appearance of flowing forms and un-manicured looking environments. This can be explained by looking at the origins of organic farming that developed in 19th century Europe as a reaction to accelerated industrialization. Organicism later emerged as an ideological movement in response to the 1930s global soil erosion crisis. Landscape tastes were similar to those of the 18th Romantic Movement who held a deep emotional relationship to nature.

The prevalent conventional farming landscape types in New Zealand, on the other hand, had a geometric "formal" controlled look. To understand how the current predominant farming landscape patterns in New Zealand evolved we need to look at the nature of 19th century European colonisation of the country. Organised immigration from Britain promised rural labourers opportunities to work their way up the social ladder and become landowners through hard work and maximum production. That necessitated a dramatic subjugation and controlling of an indigenous landscape. Twentieth century economic forces and the post World War II government's massive introduction of chemicals to boost production added to the sense and the agrarian ideology of productionism the "ideal of making two blades of grass where one grew before" (Thompson, 1995, p.51). The result was an extreme utilitarian attitude to landscape driven by efficiency and geared towards maximum production. The resulting landscape is an expression of those values.

An analysis of the two sub-cultures' discourse relating to their farm landscapes revealed that the two distinct aesthetic languages are symbolic, and tied to beliefs and ideologies about nature as well as social standing. Both groups' landscape tastes were socially constructed. The look of the landscape was important to both farming sub-cultures, however, and while tall grasses on organic farms for example, signalled neglect to neighbouring conventional farmers, the organic farmers saw beauty in the ecological diversity these landscapes offered. Another example is the Canterbury tradition of a peculiar controlled form of trimmed shelterbelts that represented "good management" in the eyes of conventional farmers, but was interpreted as "boring" and exemplifying "no understanding of nature" in the eyes of conventional farmers. Aesthetic preferences, in both farming types were associated with views of nature and ideas of ecological sustainability.

At the beginning of the 1990s, organic farming was a fringe subculture with little significant impression on landscape. When globalisation and economic opportunities to cater for a green produce niche market drove corporations to seek farmers for organic production, conventional farmers were recruited. While some organic farmers viewed corporatisation as betrayal of ideologies, most conventional farmers interviewed were concerned that managing their farms according to the organic certification standards would restrict their ability to maintain the controlled landscape that was important to them. These concerns echo the Ecological Aesthetic debate in landscape architecture.

In the case of Canterbury, some conventional farmers who adopted organic practices because of financial incentives offered by the corporations, felt the need to maintain a controlled landscape even when it was more labour intensive. This was driven by social pressure and fears of what their neighbours might think of their “good farming practices”. Others began to justify the seeming ‘untidiness’ of their farm on the grounds of its ecological purpose. Paradigms shift, we have learnt from history, deliver changes in aesthetic preferences. As organic practices permeate the mainstream, the new aesthetic might become more acceptable.

This suggests that a “globalised vernacular”, a vernacular that evolves locally but is driven by outside forces, is providing a potent opportunity to explore tensions and meanings embodied in the forms and styles landscape architects employ in designs. Perhaps a “Second Revolution in Taste” will replace the conventional beauty of nature in the Kantian sense, if landscape architects understand what underpins aesthetic preferences and respond by creative articulation of environmentally sustainable landscape designs. A new design language that will encourage filtration of ecological landscape practices could become one of positive outcomes of globalisation.

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