

*GaLA: Globalisation and Landscape
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GLOBALISATION HAS BOTH positive and negative effects on education and practice in landscape architecture, and was the central theme of a recent conference held at the St Petersburg State Forest Technical Academy. This is not a review of the conference itself, but rather a reflection on the issues that motivated it. The recent shifts in the political climate of Russia have created an arena in which both the positive and the negative effects became very apparent in terms of landscape architecture. It was the very spectre of the negative aspects of globalisation that inspired the conference theme, combined with the potential to enhance some of the positive aspects of international connectivity.

The negative spectre of globalisation was evident in a seemingly benign image shown by a Russian landscape academic visiting New Zealand. The photograph was of the garden of a Russian dacha, a country residence, and there in the middle of the garden was a Bali-style pavilion, looking almost as though it had been cut out of a magazine and stuck onto the landscape. This image was just one example of the rapid diffusion of ideas and changes to the landscape, the typically 'placeless' quality of globalised design, that have occurred since Perestroika. Even during the week of being in St Petersburg for the conference it seemed that the sprawl of malls and big boxes had spread even further along the strip between the airport and the city – this city of onion-domed churches perching upon islands fringing the Gulf of Finland, where the 'Historic Centre of Saint Petersburg and Related Groups of Monuments' is a World Heritage Site. The threats to the city fabric extend beyond the sprawl across the hinterland, but the integrity of the heritage site itself is being debated in the context of the proposal to build a tower block opposite the eighteenth-century Smolny Cathedral. The tower, designed by RMJM, will rise to 396 metres, challenging the form of the city's heritage fabric, prompting the St Petersburg Union of Architects to write, 'The low skyline makes the verticals of St Petersburg especially magnificent ... the conservation of the unique silhouettes of its spires and domes is of great importance to town planning and of spiritual importance' (Ivanova and Stolyarova, 2007). The building design had been selected from plans solicited by the firm Gazprom from international architects including Jean Nouvel, Herzog & de Meuron, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind and Massimiliano Fuksas (local architects had boycotted the tender as a protest). And it is not the design itself that is the point of criticism, but the impact on the city. As Mikhail Piotrovski, Director of the Hermitage Museum, stated, 'Some of the designs show genius ... But putting it opposite Smolny would deform the historic skyline of the city and

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look like a challenge ... It was mere accident that we inherited this fantastic city. We must not damage it' (*Spiegel Online*, 2007).

Reactions to the Balinese hut, the peri-urban sprawl, the Gazprom tower, and the urban design examples that are as much Singapore or Sydney, are of anxiety: that a place and culture with particular distinguishing qualities is becoming eroded, that it is going to become like every other place. These are manifestations of the negative, pernicious side of globalisation, and an area where landscape architecture education and practice must provide an ethical stance.

So, what of the positive potentials of globalisation? One of the key opportunities is the possibility to contribute to a dialogue, where connectivity can contribute to the advancement of all involved in particular spheres of interest. Together with the anxiety over the erosion of particular landscape qualities, this opportunity to establish a forum for discussion and debate for the emerging Russian landscape architecture profession was central to the idea of the conference. In the context of global discourse in design and allied areas, it is significant that the conference was organised by academics from New Zealand and Russia.¹ For both countries, there is a profound sense of being on the margins or, in the jargon of globalisation, the 'periphery'. For New Zealand, the sense of being on the periphery stems from a geographical condition, and for Russia, it is the legacy of the Iron Curtain that sees it marginalised in many ways.

However, the engagement of the 'periphery' within the discourse of design is intensely problematic. The critical mass of the self-declared 'centre' has undue influence on the shaping of that discourse. For academics on the margins, geographically or politically, this proves an ongoing issue. It was a point raised during the conference itself, when Jillian Walliss, a senior lecturer at the University of Melbourne, offered a challenge to the panel: that North Americans should actually read and publish material that is from the 'periphery', rather than requesting that it is rewritten to be relevant to them. For many outside of the North American 'centre' this was very familiar, knowing exactly this situation of having a paper or book proposal returned since it was not relevant to North America, and of being asked to rewrite manuscripts so that they are of relevance to that audience. At the same time, those on the 'margins' are more than familiar with reading case studies, papers, and books about North American sites that are arguably of little relevance to anyone outside North America – yet these examples are valorised with a 'universal' relevance. They are widely disseminated, such that they become the de facto global discourse of landscape architecture: a McDiscourse.

These are echoes of the experience of many within the field of arts who exist on the periphery – where geographic distance is conflated with intellectual distance by those in the 'centre'. One particular example comes to mind, of New Zealand artist Stephen Bambury, who had for years laboured under the misapprehension that he was engaged in an international art *dialogue*. However, when he visited the United States he had to 'confront ... the fact that you can't have a conversation if only one party is able to speak. That was the reality [he] had to deal with.

In world terms, we outside New York didn't exist' (Bambury in Rewi, 1997).

Ironically, this conception of the irrelevance of the periphery is reinforced by funding bodies in peripheral locations. 'International' research is valued more highly in research-accounting exercises, meaning academics away from the 'centre' are put in the position of trying to get published. For many, having been faced with the 'not relevant' response, their reaction is to abandon research of critical local relevance in favour of that which is considered part of the 'international' discourse. Here is one of the very critical negative impacts of globalisation: thinking local leads to not being global.

The relationships between core and periphery are significant in the context of landscape architecture education and practice. One of the key loci of such an argument is in the theory of critical regionalism. Frampton (1983), and Lefaivre and Tzonis (2003), for example, have been key exponents of this theoretical manoeuvre, which seeks to offer a point of balance between the perception of globalisation as an homogenising force, and the stifling position of a romantic regionalism. In his critique of critical regionalism, Eggener (2002) highlights the unease of applying such a theory to the incursions of globalised design away from the 'West'. He destabilises the apparently benign nature of the theory through exposing the ways in which critical regionalism itself is something of a globalised phenomenon. At the core of the ideas of 'centre' and 'periphery', and the notion that the periphery should 'resist' the centre, is an idea that there is a dominant design discourse and, simultaneously, one that must resist that discourse. There is a certain arrogance in such a belief, that it is thought that those who are conceptualised as from the 'periphery' are actually wishing to see their design practice viewed as a form of resistance to the homogenising forces of the centre. Why not vice versa? What does critical mass have to do with design quality, with intellectual engagement, with critical thinking? As King (1996) puts it:

these global theories ... enable those who produce or adopt them to view the world of others from one particular place, from one point of authority, from one particular social and cultural position. They produce a totalizing vision or overview which is likely to be at odds with the meanings which the inhabitants ... place on the buildings themselves. In looking for ways in which to think about buildings 'internationally' we need to be sure that we're not creating a new intellectual imperialism (p 71).

(A conference review and selected papers will appear in a future issue of *Landscape Review*.)

NOTES

- 1 The conference was convened by Maria Ignatieva, Shelley Egoz, Jacky Bowring and Glenn Stewart of Lincoln University, and Irina Melnichuk of the St Petersburg State Forest Technical Academy.

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