

Why Landscape Architecture?

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The big question in the discipline of landscape architecture hides within a deceptively short and simple word – why? The question may be asked by others outside the profession – why should landscape architecture be engaged and what value does it bring to a project, public policy, a university or society? We may ask a ‘why’ question ourselves – why do we propose this design process? That design expression? This landscape classification? That policy? In short, what is the distinctive contribution we, as landscape architects, are making to the wellbeing of the world in which we live and work? Why landscape architecture?

This is not a new question, of course. Different generations of landscape architects and planners have asked the same or similar questions and answered in various ways.

Landscape architecture has been universally motivated by a desire to stimulate and satisfy the senses and intellect (Jellicoe and Jellicoe, 1995) but also to:

- ‘improve’ property (Loudon, 1840 – on the work of Humphrey Repton);
- refresh the body and spirit (Hubbard, 1922 – on FL Olmsted’s writings);
- create ‘landscapes for living’ in our homes, cities and workplaces (Eckbo, 1950);
- ‘design with nature’ when planning cities and regions (McHarg, 1969);
- shape ‘new lives, new landscapes’ for a modern world (Fairbrother, 1970); and (most ambitiously)
- recover landscape as ‘an agent of culture’ (Corner, 1999).

In countries where landscape is deeply embedded as a cultural construct – particularly in northern Europe – the answers to ‘why landscape architecture’ are typically about how landscape should be managed, not whether it is worthy of attention.

Landscape goals and motivations have often become formalised in legal statutes and in the institutions they create – for example, through national park or environmental legislation, or through licensing requirements aimed at promoting particular aspects of public safety, health and welfare. The wide adoption within Europe of the European Landscape Convention, in particular, has given renewed impetus to a range of educational and policy activities related to cultural landscapes. In many other situations, and in other parts of the world, however, the cultural and political legitimacy of ‘landscape’ is less well established. The effective contribution of the discipline to society and culture is entirely dependent upon the advocacy, arguments and actions of its practitioners, and it is in these situations that the question ‘why’ is most acute.

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Different policy imperatives, such as energy availability and costs, food security and quality, urban management and renewal, poverty and social justice, water quality and availability, climate change adaptation, and human health and wellbeing, all place pressing and often conflicting pressures upon public policy formation, land management and project design. Their resolution will require knowledge and skills well beyond our discipline. Landscape architects will need to be both energetic and strategic in providing a compelling rationale for engagement with ‘our’ knowledge and practices, showing what added-value we can contribute to meeting these overarching imperatives.

In a study of landscape architect’s motivations, Ian Thompson (1999) identified a familiar triad of values – ecology, community and delight – but a robust value proposition for the discipline requires transformation of these landscape ‘feel good’ codes into more tangible outcomes.

Paul Selman (2006) has acutely drawn a distinction between creating policy ‘for’ landscape – typically expressed as protection of a specific landscape or landscapes in general – and making policy ‘through’ landscape to achieve other goals that are characteristically more central to the concerns of government and citizens, such as public health. This distinction can be helpful in articulating the value of a landscape perspective.

An outcome approach asks us to consider and then explain the likely ‘consequences’ of our involvement for others. Not what we aspire to, or interesting things we have learnt, or what actions we would like to undertake, or plans we will design and implement, but what tangible benefits will accrue to our clients, communities and wider society.

What will be the effect of our involvement on community health and wellbeing, or on the condition of ecosystems, or on efficiency of resource use? Outcomes do not have to be instrumental – it may be that our most distinctive and valuable contributions are to help enable collective action and strengthen identity, to inspire and educate, to challenge and empower.

Indeed, one of the most enduring values of our discipline is the creation of possibility – to explore how the future might be through design projections and landscape scenarios. The attraction of this type of contribution is illustrated by the widening range of disciplines and professions that are adopting landscape-based concepts and techniques to promote ‘their’ value propositions (Waldheim, 2006). We must not only ‘recover’ landscape as a cultural agent but also reclaim its creative potency as the core of our discipline.

In relaunching *Landscape Review* as a journal with a reinvigorated ‘southern’ focus, a key editorial challenge will be to ensure the material we publish communicates the ‘value’ of the new landscape-based knowledge that is being shared. *Landscape Review* has always had a commitment to plain language – to speak clearly to power, truth and possibility. We need to share and apply landscape knowledge, ideas and insights in accessible and compelling ways that directly connect our discipline with the multiple and frequently contested needs of wider society in an ever more uncertain future.

Why landscape architecture? *He tangata, he tangata, he tangata* – it is people, it is people, it is people.

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