

Eyes that Can See and Hands that Can Make. A response

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One evening in the Fall 2004 semester at the faculty mailboxes, I found a small pamphlet written by Iowa State landscape architecture faculty Hohmann and Langhorst. Intriguingly entitled “An Apocalyptic Manifesto.,” I sat down to read it. Expecting a provocative declaration of beliefs about the future of landscape architecture, I was disheartened to find a whining screed full of mis-representations and mis-characterizations of history and current state of landscape architecture.

This was a disappointment to me for several reasons. I teach a course called Theories of Modern Landscape Architecture, and have done so since 1989. This three-credit course explains the modern designed landscape as a distinct mode of cultural production while underscoring landscape architectural theory’s inextricability from changing societal constructions of nature, environmentalism and the modernizing city. Through the examination of design treatises, manifestos and contemporary theoretical writings from outside the design fields, the course recovers the theory (and practice) of modern landscape architecture from its marginalization as an anti-urban aesthetic of informal, open spaces. Instead, it reveals how landscape architects re-imagined the city-as-landscape at the same time that landscape appreciation were re-invigorated by the hybridization of scientific (19th c geology and 20th c ecology) and artistic discourse. In contrast to a mainstream that valued figures, object-making, universal solutions and detached contemplation, modern landscape architecture explored fields, process, site specificity and engagement. By examining this hybrid design language and its

resultant full spaces, my students expand their understanding of what constituted modernity. Given that recent criticism of mid-twentieth century modernism has focused on the ethical and aesthetic limitations of those mainstream concerns, knowledge of these “marginal” late 19th and 20th century landscape theories and practices is germane to students in landscape architecture, history, planning and architecture who are interested in green urbanism, landscape urbanism, operations and performativity, ecology and technology as well as feminist theory and criticism.

Little of the depth and richness of the material I cover in the class was acknowledged by the manifesto authors. Their cynicism seemed hampered by their limited conception of current practice, but also by their lack of historical awareness of the discipline. I was especially disappointed as one of the authors had been a student in the early years I taught at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design. Over the next few months, I responded to the “Apocalyptic Manifesto” in two ways. I wrote a public response to it that was printed in the April 2005 issue of *Landscape Architecture*, and I created a new assignment for my Spring 2005 Theories course asking students to respond to the “Apocalyptic Manifesto” as well.

In my *Landscape Architecture* magazine essay, I wrote

“An Apocalyptic Manifesto” is neither a manifesto—“a public declaration of motives and intentions” (as the authors claim)—nor apocalyptic—revelatory and disclosing. It is a list of complaints and contradictory assertions—the whining of those who are not satisfied with the profession but who are unengaged in changing it. It is the yearning of those who desire theory in a design field to share the predictive role of theory in the natural sciences.

If authors Hohmann and Langhorst think landscape architecture can be reduced to site engineering, site ecology, environmental art, site design, planting plans, sustainable design, and cultural criticism—all of which can be accomplished better by someone else—let them diagnose their landscape architecture patient as terminal. The practice of landscape architecture I see is alive and has never been better.

I could argue with most of Hohmann and Langhorst’s assertions, but they offer no evidence, so there’s nothing to argue against. Rather, I would like to examine their thesis, as it is founded on a serious case of mistaken identity due to “eyes that cannot see.”¹

What follows are several of the students’ responses; these position papers were written by eyes that do see. The responses took several forms, from critiques of the “Apocalyptic Manifesto” to alternative manifestos. I found the students’ writings inspiring, as they were simultaneously creative and critical. They were personal, yes. But they were also an extension of the larger intention of my course: to recover the vocabulary, theories and practices of landscape architecture by deconstructing the stylistic constraints of earlier histories that could not see beyond such limiting categories as man versus nature, formal versus informal,

1. Elizabeth K. Meyer, “Eyes that Cannot See,” a review of Hohmann and Jorst’s “Apocalyptic Manifesto”. *Landscape Architecture* 94:4 (April 2004).

culture versus nature; and by reconstructing landscape architecture theory and practice in its own voice, through its own categories and concerns. The student writings that follow demonstrate that a creative and critical stance towards contemporary practice is grounded in personal conviction and an awareness of the discourse of one’s field, the communication of ideas and construction of a conversation across generations. My Theories of Modern Landscape Architecture course is structured as a conversation between designers, texts and contexts, but it is also an introduction to how to join that conversation, to contribute to its content and direction, and to keep it lively, meaningful and affirming.

Graduate architecture students Matt Ibarra and Ryan Moody, two of the editors of this new journal, were participants in that Spring 2005 class and conversation, held during lunch time, 12:30-2 pm, on Tuesday and Thursday. Their decision to take my course as an elective reminds me that memorable conversations often include new voices from outside one’s familiar circle. Conversations over lunch and lectures during lunch-time are part of a larger field of discourse in the Department of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at UVA. Given the convictions, the careful reasoning, and the theoretical foundations evident in the verbal and written forms of conversation I have with students in the Department, I have high expectations for this generation of designers. Unlike the authors of “Apocalyptic Manifesto,” these landscape architects and architects are channeling their dissatisfaction with how things are done into statements of beliefs upon which design action can occur.

renaissance: a new birth; any revival, or period of marked improvement and new life, in art, literature, etc.

manifesto: a public declaration or proclamation, written or spoken; esp. a printed declaration, explanation, or justification of policy issued by a head of state, government, or political party or candidate, or any other individual or body of individuals of public relevance, as a school or movement in the arts

oxford english dictionary, www.oed.com

After a period of stagnation during the early 20th century, practitioners and academics revived the field of landscape architecture during the latter half of the century and are poised to push it quickly forward into the 21st. The field has reached the tipping point, ready to spill out and permeate quotidian exchanges from the smallest to largest of scales. Ideas and issues of landscape are infiltrating the work of architects, planners, engineers, artists, environmentalists, corporations, politicians, governments, schools, lawyers, doctors, developers and neighbors. Now is the time to harness and cultivate this momentum and cultural currency to enable landscape architecture to become or, more accurately, to reestablish itself as a critical force in shaping, celebrating and revealing the cultural, social, ecological, and aesthetic values of society through the medium of landscape. The following is a list of the qualities that define the profession and should be held on to, as well as suggestions for moving the field forward.

We ground our designs in site and milieu

As designers our objective is to embrace and activate the “landscape as a verb”¹ through education and practice.

We:

- ▶ amplify
- ▶ reveal
- ▶ heighten
- ▶ distill
- ▶ translate
- ▶ elucidate
- ▶ uncover
- ▶ discover
- ▶ make legible

1. Corner, James. *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture*, 1999.

We design incrementally, through space and over time

This mosaic approach allows designers to tap into a rich, layered and ever-changing tapestry of experience and meaning tied to cultural values and rituals.

We adapt, translate, and integrate ideas from diverse disciplines

This is not cribbing or stealing, it is the essence of design and innovation. We must exploit the edges and blur the boundaries. We do not live, play or work in a vacuum and can not push the field forward if we pretend and practice as though we do.

We design for people

We provide opportunities for people to feel engaged and immersed in a site. We cultivate the inherent layers of a site in a way that both responds to people's needs and shapes our social, cultural and ecological experiences. We help people realize the potential of the designed landscape to positively influence their daily lives. To this end, we must embrace the responsibility of designing public spaces that serve and improve the conditions of communities that are most in need. Landscapes can be transformative, and we are only beginning to uncover their potential to provide a forum and space for social and community recovery.

We engage in a cultural practice

In the act of design, choices of representation – what we analyze, map or value in some way through our design – become critical. Ultimately, we create a narrative for the site, and the decisions we make through each step of the design process will determine to a large extent the voices and stories that will be heard when construction is complete. This provides a unique opportunity to challenge overarching master narratives and create a platform for recovering alternative and suppressed histories, conceptions, and perceptions of landscape.

We offer a new lens for 'seeing' the landscape in the fullest possible sense

We construct environmental and spatial experiences through the formulation and application of:

- ▶ physical
- ▶ tactile
- ▶ kinesthetic
- ▶ textural
- ▶ temporal
- ▶ aural
- ▶ sensual
- ▶ social
- ▶ cultural
- ▶ ecological
- ▶ visual

layers, fluxes and flows that are particular to a site.

Environmental health is inherent to our work, but should not be formally deterministic

We must not hide behind the cloak of nature. Ecological functionality and integrity should be aspirations in every design. However, in order to resonate with a greater audience and ultimately push the environmental movement forward, our hand should be evident in our work. Mimicry of nature is not appropriate for our field. It perpetuates the misconceptions of landscape architecture as a panacea for environmental ills, and that humanity is somehow separate from nature. We must not lose sight of the environment as a constructed entity. We cannot support practices that mislead people to believe in the impracticable idea that we can control and/or replace nature – we need to understand the breadth and extent of our presence in and impact upon the earth.

We must embrace and master our media: soils | water | plants | weather

These four materials are highlighted because when combined, they are unique and integral to the distinction of our profession. Although these materials have remained relatively consistent over time, our understanding of their attributes and qualities has changed dramatically. At the most basic level, an understanding of these materials grounds us in the processes operating on a site and connects a place to a larger region. Soils determine what can grow or be built. Water and drainage provide a more meaningful definition of territory and boundaries than a tax parcel map. Our understanding as designers of the spatial, temporal and figural qualities of plants places us in a unique position to deploy them in thoughtful, innovative and didactic ways. Weather impacts all of these media and can be harnessed or mitigated to provide spaces and resources for living.

Finally, we must improve our ability to test | evaluate | revisit our work

We should aim to quantify and qualify the relationship between our design intentions and results. We must learn from and build upon a more rigorous understanding of built works. We have to understand where we have come from in order to determine where and how we should move forward.

The title page of the *Apocalyptic Manifesto* states:

“Rem Koolhaas has said, ‘The fatal weakness of manifestos is their inherent lack of evidence’. The authors agree with this statement. However, since landscape architecture is generally lacking in manifestos, we thought maybe it was time for one.”¹

As an opening statement, authors Hohmann and Langhorst immediately set the tone for a cynical and general manifesto, while simultaneously representing an inherent denial of the only consistent understanding of landscape architecture; that of a dialectic. I will challenge this cynical attitude and its translation as an invalid tool for the creation of a landscape manifesto. Specifically I will critique this argument through an examination of the fifth and sixth points of the manifesto.

cynic: A person disposed to rail or find fault; now usually: One who shows a disposition to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions, and is wont to express this by sneers and sarcasms; a sneering fault finder.

dialectic: The art of critical examination into the truth of an opinion; the investigation of truth by discussion; in earlier English use; a synonym of logic as applied to formal rhetorical reasoning; logical argumentation or disputation.²

6. *If Landscape Architecture cannot define a current direction, neither can it cope with its status as an undefined and undefinable profession*

Sometimes, typically around 4am on the nights of charette, I wish I sold light bulbs. By my analogy, the light bulb would be easy because I would understand exactly what its potential is. A customer who wished to purchase a light bulb would know exactly what they wanted, 60 watts, full spectrum or maybe a blue or black light. The point is that the light bulb is understood clearly as an object whose potential lies directly within its function; to light something such as a room or a walkway.

1. Hohmann, Heidi. *Landscape Architecture: An Apocalyptic Manifesto*, 2004, title page.
2. definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary www.oed.com

In contrast to the light bulb, the potential of landscape architecture cannot be so easily defined. It can not be relegated to a socket in the wall and turned on at the flip of a switch. This reality is embedded in the consideration that Landscape Architecture is inherently as much a conversation of cultural values and space as it is about the physical manifestation of these concepts. Its potential is constantly being re-considered. This reconsideration is not and should not be thought of as a detriment to landscape but rather as an opportunity for understanding the unique circumstance of the landscape medium, living and constantly shifting, vastly different from every other design profession.

If as a profession we are so desperate to be defined, which could be argued as unnecessary and irrelevant³, then this pursuit is clearly bound within the dialectic of landscape. Ultimately, this dialectic allows the profession to grow and mature; it is more than semantics, as the authors would argue. Instead, the *Apocalyptic Manifesto* continually takes the position of the child cynic, refusing to engage in the consideration of the dialectic as a tool for advancing the profession of Landscape Architecture. Rather, the authors claim, “no one’s listening”.⁴

In conjunction with shifting social values and artistic thought, this dialectic has evolved over time. I offer a representation of this evolution, exemplified by both practitioners and artists who have explored the medium of the landscape. Their thoughts are representative of this dialectic, examined closely through the consistent re-consideration of the meaning of Landscape Architecture and its relation to the social thought.

Garret Eckbo “What is Landscape Design” 1950

“In order to define and evaluate a human activity we must establish its relationship to the general cultural pattern of the society in which it occurs... but with special primary emphasis on the human content, the relation between people and the landscape... ”⁵

Robert Smithson “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectic Landscape” 1972

“...dialectical materialism applied to the physical landscape, Dialectics of this type are a way of seeing things in a manifold of relations, not as isolated object. Nature for the dialectician is indifferent to any formal ideal... ”⁶

3. I believe there is a general level of ignorance on everyone’s part about what others do within their profession; however this does not keep these professions from having meaning. For example, as a daily routine I have no idea what a biochemist does. That said, if I have a headache and I go to the store, buy aspirin and feel better, I have been affected and my life is better because of that research. There really is still no acknowledgement of the specific chemist, lab, or pharmaceutical company. While at the same time aspirin is entirely necessary and justifiable. In that manner, if I design a park, and someone visits that park and for even one second feels a little better, or perhaps even a little different than they did walking off the street, if there is a moment where they acknowledge their own existence a little differently, that is all a landscape architect can hope for. Why do I need them to know, ‘hey this place was designed by a landscape architect’? If as a profession we believe individually or collectively in what we do, then the idea of a typological definition of landscape architecture seems slightly absurd and perhaps even detrimental.

4. Hohmann, Heidi *Landscape Architecture: An Apocalyptic Manifesto*, 2004, p.9.

5. Eckbo, Garrett *What is Landscape Design?* 5-9, *Landscape for Living* 1950 p.

6. Smithson, Robert. *Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape*, reprinted in Nancy Holt’s *The Writings of Robert Smithson* 1979, p.119.

J.B. Jackson, "The Word Itself", 1984

"...we will eventually formulate a new definition of landscape: a composition of man-made or man modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective human transformation; and if background seems inappropriately modest we should remember that in our modern use of the word it means that which underscores not only our identity and presence, but also our identity and presence, but also our history..."⁸

Christophe Giroto, "Developments in Landscape Architecture in Europe" *Topos*, Dec 2004

"The semantic shift in the concepts of both landscape and city is so significant that we can speak of a paradigm shift, a shift that makes landscape and the city interchangeable on the widest variety of levels. The urbanism that we are experiencing today is new as a phenomena..."⁹

The continuum of re-defining and evaluating landscape is clearly presented here as an opportunity to think critically about the ways that we inhabit and experience our landscapes, our built environment. It is through this critical thought and its manifestation by which our experience of landscape becomes tangible. Therefore, landscape architecture must be able to respond to changing social, cultural and environmental values. Again, this response is intimately tied to the ways we as a profession structure our dialectic, our own pursuit of truth, surely not as a cynical gesture, which offers the death of a patient as a solution. Authors Hohmann and Langhorst continually deny the dialectic of the landscape. I am not surprised they feel no one is listening; their voices are speaking empty and silent words, lacking in critical thought.

5. Landscape Architecture today has no central or core defining values

The dialectic of landscape architecture offers opportunity, and potential within what the authors call the "ambiguous nature"¹⁰ of landscape architecture. Specifically, the dialectic allows for an ambiguity, which is productive and allows for an infiltration of thought in landscape that ultimately creates new definitions responding to new social conditions. Values of Landscape Architecture are in direct response to ever changing values of society, directly tied to site, history and social need or more specifically, "environment". To state that "landscape architecture today, lacks a compelling and unifying social agenda"¹¹ is again to find fault with that aspect of landscape which defines it uniquely, separate from every other profession: landscape architecture is a profession of response, it is an action, not complacent and accepting, but responding to and challenging the values of our constructed environments. If the profession seeks a *raison d'être*, let it be found there in the active engagement of both the conversation and construction of our built environment.

8. Jackson, J.B. 'Discovering the Vernacular Landscape', *The Word Itself* 1984 p.8.

9. Giroto, Christophe. 'Developments in Landscape Architecture in Europe' *Topos* 2004/49 p.40.

10. Hohmann, Heidi. *Landscape Architecture: An Apocalyptic Manifesto*, 2004 p.10.

11. Ibid, p.6.

Cross pollination is a healthy and vibrant activity and nothing new to landscape architecture. The field has thrived on the influence of many other disciplines. For example, James Rose and Garrett Eckbo were influenced by sculpture, Gertrude Jekyll by color theory, Jens Jensen by ecology, Lawrence Halprin by dance, and Frederick Law Olmsted by geology. Acts of cross pollination are not "poaching" methodologies, as Hohmann and Langhorst suggest in *An Apocalyptic Manifesto*, but are rather sources of inspiration. We need to acknowledge that ideas and methodologies adapt when media changes. When Jekyll applied color theory to the garden it became more complex, necessitating an increased knowledge of plant cycles including their bloom colors, times and physical size. This type of cross pollination is rich and exciting: it's the life of Landscape Architecture.

The recent merger of the Departments of Landscape Architecture and Architecture at the University of Virginia has given students the opportunity to re-understand and re-imagine the cross pollination available in the field of Landscape Architecture. I have personally seen this in the context of the ecoMOD studio, which has been an intense arena for the union, as well as friction, between disciplines. During the explanation of the departmental merger Julie Bargmann and Bill Sherman described the union as a 'marriage of disciplines'. This analogy is quite helpful in allowing us to move forward. People have married for centuries; we should learn what we can from this relationship. For any marriage to work, some key issues must be understood and practiced.

1. The partners are unique individuals.

To state the obvious, marriage is the union of two different individuals. There are many similarities between landscape architecture and architecture, but there are some crucial differences as well. Too often we focus on the similarities of the two disciplines leading to an oversimplification of both. We must understand, enjoy, and expound on our differences; those elements that make landscape architecture unique.

The ecoMOD project is a good case study of this point. In the context of the studio we saw that architecture and landscape architecture have quite different units of measure and ordering devices. As we have seen through our landscape ancestors, ideas that traverse various fields change dramatically as the media changes. ecoMOD exposed how ideas of modularity, economy, and ecology changed as they traversed between architecture and landscape architecture. This was beautiful and exciting to see.

The field of Landscape Architecture brings several items to the relationship. Our ancestors remind us:

Remember the body

How will the body experience this place?

Remember the site

There is a history to this place. It has depth, volume, and duration.

Remember systems

The “site” is part of a larger system; ecological, geological, solar, and social.

Remember time

Change happens, enjoy it. How are duration and cycles revealed?

Remember the media

Plants, dirt, sun, wind, and light each have their own orders and measures.

2. There must be mutual respect (even enjoyment) between the partners.

To achieve simply a bearable union, one partner does not dominate, coerce, or bully the other. For a relationship to thrive and be enjoyed we must move beyond pure tolerance to sincere interest in one another. This is achieved through knowledge; we must know and be known by our partner. The largest stumbling block for this goal is an assumption of knowledge. If we are not careful, the marriage of disciplines at the University of Virginia will create architecture graduates that assume they know landscape architecture. Early in the ecoMOD studio, there was an effort by many architecture students to “bring the landscape in.” The question was posed “what is the landscape?” Answer: plants and light; no acknowledgement of the exciting elements such as interactions with the body, the site, the systems, the time, or the media that landscape architecture is able to imagine. Such oversimplification does not foster respect or unity. The ecoMOD studio was a great opportunity for the fields to get to know one another better. We were able to share, discuss and sometimes argue to expand our understanding of one another. There needs to be more places for this day-to-day intimacy between the partners within the school. The relationship is dirty, but worth it.

The enjoyment of each other is not a linear process with a point of conclusion. The relationship and the individuals change over time. We need to be persistent about understanding each other. This is where experimentation reappears. We need to experiment together. I respect the experimentation of practitioners such as Eckbo, Rose, and Jekyll. They acknowledged the potential of cross pollination and used projects to facilitate learning. The disciplines need to rub elbows, working on projects together that are bold and experimental.

3. There must be constant, effective communication.

One of the most popular pieces of advice for any marriage is to foster effective communication. As previously suggested, architecture and landscape architecture need to rub elbows. The ecoMOD studio allowed us to focus on a project side by side, fight when necessary, and learn to communicate with each other more effectively. Although we often disagreed, discussing opinions ultimately led to greater respect.

Binary relations such as man and nature, ecology and technology, and architecture and landscape hinder communication. It is tempting, since there are two disciplines, to set them in opposition. However, such binaries erode effective communication and oversimplify the complexity of our relationship; one that is composed of a rich gradient rather than two opposing forces. Again, we need to remember our ancestors. Exclusive binaries erased the history and importance of overlooked cultures. We need to avoid this mistake by enjoying and representing the rich hybrids that exist.

The marriage is tough, but our relationship is worth the struggle.