CHARLES A. BIRNBAUM

WHY NOT CULTURAL SYSTEMS?

In “Why Not Cultural Systems?” Charles A. Birnbaum challenges us to consider the cultural value of the designed landscape. Citing examples from the visibility of recent urban projects such as the High Line to the potential destruction of several significant modernist public works, Birnbaum highlights important questions of how to assess the role of landscape in the contemporary city.

Questions about the cultural value of the designed urban landscape have moved from intellectual arguments in scholarly journals to debates in city councils, on editorial pages, in the blogosphere, and elsewhere in the public realm from San Francisco, CA; Flint, MI; Fresno, CA; Burlington, VT; Minneapolis, MN; Fort Worth, TX; and New York City, NY, to Trenton, NJ. Increasingly and incrementally, the cultural value of Modernist works, namely those from the recent past are being re-evaluated as the resurrection of the nation’s urban centers continues. However, this reconsideration is still too often accompanied by a threat to a site’s existence or design integrity.

First, we might want to define the cultural value of landscape architecture—but that’s tricky. Ask yourself how you define the cultural value of buildings, sculpture, and paintings and then see how those criteria apply to landscape. We may not have a consensus about the cultural value of architecture and the allied arts, but we know they have value because we’ve learned they do. Perhaps it would be helpful to look at what gives something cultural value. I would argue a core component is *authenticity*.

Take, for example, an artwork by Frank Stella or Donald Judd. It has cultural and monetary value because of its authenticity. People will pay seven figures to buy art by a Minimalist master or pay a museum entrance fee to see one because of its authenticity and significance. In architectural terms, Mies’s Minimalist design for the Barcelona Pavilion or Luis Barragan’s house and studio in Mexico City are viewed as authentic and therefore sacrosanct, while a Minimalist landscape composition by Dan Kiley is viewed as expendable. The irony here is that the Barcelona Pavilion is a reconstruction. This notion about realness is more than a hunch. A National Park Service survey “Identifying the Real Thing” found that people want to see and experience the real thing. “Only ‘the real thing’ contains the evidence to support its symbolic and visual importance.”[1] So if the public doesn’t see it, how can they value it?

Opposite: James Corner Field Operations, Diller, Scofidio + Renfro, and Piet Oudolf, *High Line*, phase 2, New York City, 2011. © 2013 Alex S. MacLean/Landslides. alexmaclean.com

We're in a transitional stage. While the fundamental question of cultural value is being raised and explored, a broadly held knowledge base for assessing its value is still developing along with an understanding of the landscape architect's role. That's why New York's High Line (James Corner Field Operations, landscape architect) is so important in demonstrating how the successful melding of historic preservation and design can honor the significance of a unique cultural asset and incorporate it into a thoroughly contemporary design. Nevertheless, even while the role of the landscape architect is becoming more visible at places like the High Line, the Lurie Garden at Chicago's Millennium Park (Kathryn Gustafson), Brooklyn Bridge Park (Michael van Valkenburgh), and Los Angeles' Grand Park (Rios Clemente Hale), the understanding of what they do still lags behind, especially when it comes to the systems-based problem solving and planning that underpins the profession.

Broadly speaking, the public is hardwired to recognize the value of architecture and has a basic understanding of an architect's function. For example, if we asked a random sampling of people to define the qualities of a Modern building, most if not all would be able to do so. But when asked to describe the qualities of a Modern landscape, the outcome would likely be very different. Modern architecture has a perceived cultural value, while urban post-war Modern landscapes are often treated as out of fashion, frequently ill-maintained and usually viewed as empty space that needs to be filled and/or programmed. Reinforcing this idea is the fact that more than 1,000 structures listed in the National Register of Historic Places are less than 50 years of age while only a handful of works of landscape architecture have been afforded such recognition. Moreover, urban landscapes are not read as a total and integrated design expression, but frequently as its constituent parts—paving, trees, fountains, benches, sculpture, furnishings, etc. Imagine if our perception of architecture was the same, seeing buildings as doorknobs, staircases, and windows rather than as a design totality. A landscape architect's contribution is often thought of as "parsley around the roast" (that's how Tommy Church described landscape architecture's relationship to architecture), while an architect's design is viewed as an artistic statement.

Here's the bottom line: Recognizing, learning and/or being sensitized to landscape's cultural value and understanding the role of the landscape architect is critical to informed stewardship of our collective designed landscape legacy.

WHILE THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION OF CULTURAL VALUE IS BEING EXPLORED, A BROADLY HELD KNOWLEDGE BASE FOR ASSESSING ITS VALUE IS STILL DEVELOPING ALONG WITH AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT'S ROLE.

Given this current state of affairs, what's the role of communications? This is particularly important given the function of community-based meetings and not-for-profit neighborhood groups in very public and sometimes volatile debates about development, design, historic preservation, and planning. Among traditional print media, there are fewer full time architecture critics and, with some exceptions, they continue not to understand or don't make an effort to understand the role of landscape architecture and therefore treat it dismissively. Conversely, the proliferation of blogs, web sites, and other new media outlets has increased the opportunities for cogently discussing and assessing the role, function, and import of landscape architecture and its practitioners. Unfortunately, several of the leading blogs and web sites run the same stories, provide minimal critical insight, and are object/architecture centric—an antediluvian Balkanization of ideas that ignores the interconnectedness of design and historic preservation disciplines.

The compartmentalization or silo mentality that plays out in both academia and professional practice is not new. Harvard professor Norman Newton, who taught at the University from 1939 to 1967, and is best known for his comprehensive, classic 1971 text, *Design on the Land*,[2] also published the oft-forgotten 1949 textbook, *An Approach to Design*,[3] which contains the following cautionary observation in the chapter "Continuity in Design:"

> We live in a world of ever-increasing technical complexity. In order to get things done in such a world...we have arbitrarily segmented the whole continuous field of design into separate professions, within each of which there is an emphasis on the development of ability in certain particular techniques and special skills. (87)

Courtesy Municipality Madrid

West8 with MRIO arquitectos, *Madrid Río*, Salón de Pinos and Oblique Bridge, Madrid, Spain, 2011. The Madrid Río project, like New York's High Line, incorporates historic fabric—including several historic bridges along the Manzanares River— with a new design. Among the major features is the Salón de Pinos, designed as a linear green space and located almost entirely on top of a motorway tunnel, which links existing and newly designed urban spaces with each other along the Manzanares.

Newton later says this separation of professions "in our schools of design" carries on to "our subsequent practice."(88)

Okay, then maybe for depth of content and for instilling values, we have to look to academia and the landscape architecture profession to provide leadership and promote literacy and understanding—so, how well are they doing? While you marinate in those thoughts, let me provide additional context about a profession that continues to evolve.

In 1969, Ian McHarg's *Design with Nature* was published in which he promoted an ecological approach to design—namely, design that goes hand in hand with hydrology, soil analysis, climate, and other factors.[4] This was the era that introduced recycling, the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, and many others. Scholars, the profession, lawmakers, and the general public were learning about a new mindset and its accompanying language, especially the utilitarian sounding, but fundamentally necessary Environmental Impact Statement. We were no longer immune from what we did to the land and the impact we had on it.

In *Design with Nature* McHarg embraced urban America, noting in his introduction that "every city has some testimony to perception, intelligence, and art."[5] It is not the urban landscape but the threat of sprawl that is motivating his call to action. In the chapter, "A Response of Values," McHarg writes, "So far, we have been concerned to establish that natural phenomena are dynamic interacting processes, responsive to laws, and that these proffer opportunities and limitations to human use …. But what of the land's capacity?"[6]

We have McHarg to thank for opening our eyes to both evaluating and valuing nature when managing inevitable change in the metropolitan regions surrounding our cities. But how do we build on the foundations laid by Newton and McHarg in adopting planning, design and historic preservation tools and regulations that integrate the unique and authentic cultural values embedded in our rapidly disappearing post-war legacy of urban landscape architecture infrastructure?

As evidence of a shifting tide in the valuation of Modern landscape architecture, this past Fall four major works were considered for listing in the National Register

of Historic Places—the Portland Chain of Open Spaces in Portland, OR (designed by Lawrence Halprin), Gas Works Park in Seattle, WA (Richard Haag), Tucson Community Center (Garrett Eckbo) and Minneapolis, MN's Peavey Plaza (M. Paul Friedberg)—the last of which is also threatened with demolition and its cultural significance has been deemed irrelevant. In January, two of those four sites—Gas Works Park and Peavey Plaza—were added to the Register, the others are still pending. Building on these recent developments, is the time ripe to develop additional tools for evaluating and valuing our authentic Modernist landscape heritage—going beyond designation and sustainable design solutions? If under US law an Environmental Impact Statement is required for certain actions that "significantly affect the quality of the human environment," should Cultural Impact Statements be in our future? Can design and historic preservation professionals make this part of our toolkit for responsible design and wise, sustainable stewardship?

IF UNDER US LAW AN ENVIRONMENAL IMPACT STATEMENT IS REQUIRED FOR CERTAIN ACTIONS THAT "SIGNIFICANTLY AFFECT THE QUALITY OF THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT," SHOULD CULTURAL IMPACT STATEMENTS BE IN OUR FUTURE?

As mentioned in the opening, debates are occurring around the country and more often than not the decision on action is cast as an either/or scenario, either "preserve" or "raze and replace." On occasion that is appropriate. Usually, however, it's not. Nevertheless, proverbial lines in the sand are drawn, the usual suspects queue up to take sides and more reasoned conversation is trampled. Remember when we used to talk about the "third way?" Perhaps it's time to resurrect that concept. How can we strike a balance between change and continuity? When do we destroy sufficient historic fabric to such an extent that we lose the authentic, character-defining features that make a work of landscape architecture distinct or significant? Are there solutions that can be evaluated and endorsed by both the design and historic preservation communities?

We've already mentioned the High Line which has spawned efforts in other cities to replicate the "High Line effect" with their own stretches of abandoned railroad track. But straight replication is inherently problematic. The New York site is the unique confluence of a realtor's three favorite words—location, location, location—with a remarkable friends group, an exceptional philanthropic base, and a brilliant design. Moreover, the tremendous success of the High Line brings with it an expectation for comparable success in other locations—that's a recipe for disaster. Instead, municipalities should employ a more flexible, constructive and entrepreneurial mindset, one that looks broadly at cities' cultural assets and thinks more holistically about their integration. Following are some examples around the country where currently threatened unique cultural expressions of landscape architecture could be creatively adapted.

The Fulton Mall in Fresno, a six-block pedestrian mall on the site of Fresno's historic main street was constructed in 1964 and this pioneering attempt at revitalizing a city's center by Garrett Eckbo and Victor Gruen was one of more than 200 urban pedestrian malls constructed in North America from 1959 to the mid-1980s. Fresno's downtown suffered like dozens and dozens nationally and now the Fulton Mall is being reassessed. The current debate is an "either/or" scenario—either reopen all of the streets to vehicular traffic as a new design calls for, or reopen none as preservationists want. The former would fundamentally alter the site's design, while the latter doesn't adequately recognize present day needs or economic realities. A middle-ground solution that recognizes the Mall's cultural value as a seminal project in Eckbo's career and the oldest, surviving Mall in the Modernist style is called for.

Peavey Plaza in Minneapolis is another situation (full disclosure: My organization is a co-plaintiff in a suit to prevent the Plaza's demolition. I was also a consultant on the team selected to revitalize Peavey). Completed in 1975, this Modernist public space, adjacent to Orchestra Hall is the most important extant work by M. Paul Friedberg and the progenitor of the "park plaza" landscape typology. According to the ASLA'*s Valued Places: Landscape Architecture in Minnesota,* "The plaza is considered a high point of modern-period landscape architecture in Minneapolis."[7] Orchestra Hall is undergoing a major

© Garrett Eckbo Collection, Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley

Garrett Eckbo, *Tucson Community Center,* Tucson, Arizona, 1973

renovation and they and the City have decided that Peavey no longer works for them and should be replaced.

Peavey has been poorly maintained and does need help. However, the public is being offered a false choice —either raze and replace the Plaza or restore it to its original 1975 condition, which the City misleadingly calls a "replacement." Why not *rehabilitation*?[8] This approach would maintain the site's character defining features while addressing accessibility and programmatic issues. Friedberg, at his own expense, came up with an alternative concept that solved the problems. Nevertheless, the City has determined there are no alternatives to demolition and that a *tabula rasa* approach is necessary.

Similarly afflicted is Fort Worth's Heritage Park, designed by Lawrence Halprin. It opened in 1980 and in 2012 became the first Halprin landscape designated on the National Register of Historic Places. This forerunner of his work at the FDR Memorial in Washington, DC—a sequence of outdoors rooms linked by an interpretive narrative and animated by water—is now surrounded by a chain link fence, the water has been turned off and its condition has severely deteriorated. Urban redevelopment interests have decided that this design, like Peavey, doesn't work for them and it has to go.

Here's the irony. Lack of maintenance is like removal of life support, but here we blame the patient for getting sicker. Consequently, these parks, starved of resources, are deemed at fault and *must be demolished!*

This happened at Skyline Park, a Modernist Halprin design in Denver, Colorado. The park was poorly maintained and degraded. The signature water features were shut off and the homeless populated the site. Public officials and local business owners who wanted a more inviting environment succeeded in amputating large sections. Now, a decade since the introduction of a new design, the problems that the old park "caused" are still present and there's a growing recognition that a unique cultural expression that helped make downtown Denver a distinct destination was needlessly sacrificed—the generic replacement is no panacea.[9]

This situation is not exclusive to landscape architecture; the well-established architecture preservation community still battles daily to save examples of the nation's unique modernist and vernacular architecture. But, they deal with a public that has a basic understanding of architecture's worth and an awareness of the variety of design and the value that authenticity and diversity brings

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M. Paul Friedberg + Partners, *Peavey Plaza*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1976

to their communities—landscape, by contrast, is largely invisible. Moreover, landscape architecture in these situations is generally demonized and needs to be defended before a public education campaign can be mounted about its value and virtues.

We are in era of urban re-renewal where infrastructure, in all of its rich, glorious and at times messy manifestations lays dormant, and often invisible. Recognizing that these extant, yet diminished works of landscape architecture have the potential to serve as connective tissue in our shared cultural narrative aptly builds upon Newton's quest to eliminate segmentation in teaching and practice, while expanding upon McHarg's valuation beyond merely ecological systems. *New York Times* architecture critic Michael Kimmelman alluded to this re-renewal in his review of *Spontaneous Interventions—Design Actions for the Common Good* (the official US entry at the Venice Architecture Biennale), when he quotes one architect as saying "every city is a fixer-upper."[10] The "fixer-upper" mentality, as the exhibit notes, underpins "citizen-led urban improvements."

Going forward, the challenge for us all, beginning in academia and continuing in our professional practices, is to harness the energy, involvement and collective concern of those engaged in "citizen-led urban improvements" and in the process teach them how to see and value the landscape that they often move through every day. We need to promote a comprehensive systems-based planning process that embraces a shared narrative and the unique cultural expression embedded within this irreplaceable urban fabric. Abstaining from or abdicating that responsibility will most certainly lead to more bland design and the additional homogenization of our urban core.

NOTES

Birnbaum

1 D. van der Reyden, “Identifying the Real Thing” (New York: National Park Service, 1996), 1, accessed December 2012, si.edu/mci/downloads/RELACT/identifying_the_real_thing.pdf.

2 Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.

3 Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley Press, 1951.

4 Garden City, NY: Natural History Press, 1969.

5 Ibid., 5.

6 Ibid., 79.

7 Larry Millett; St. Paul: MHS Press, 2007.

8 “Rehabilitation is defined as the act or process of making possible a compatible use for a property through repair, alterations, and additions while preserving those portions or features which convey its historical, cultural, or architectural values.” Standards for Rehabilitation & Guidelines for Rehabilitating Cultural Landscapes, The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards fro the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes. Edited by Charles A. Birnbaum and Christine Capella Peters. US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Cultural Resource Stewardship and Partnerships, Heritage Preservation Services, Historic Landscape Initiative, Washington, DC 1996. P. 48.

9 The Cultural Landscape Foundation is partnering with Princeton Architectural Press on the series Modern Landscapes: Transition and Transformation. The first monograph in the series, *Lawrence Halprin’s Skyline Park*, by Ann Komara, was published in September 2012.

10 Michael Kimmelman, “Projects without Architects Steal the Show,” *New York Times*, September 12, 2012.