MUST LANDSCAPES MEAN? (1995)

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I

During the last decade, the amount of writing purporting to deal with meaning in landscape design has grown impressively.[1] Landscape architects now write of their attempts to imbue designs with significance by referring to such conditions as existing natural forms or to the historic aspects of the site. Cultural geographers, calling upon a collective body of study that extends back well over half a century, interpret ordinary landscapes by first looking at the world around them; in their eyes, meaning congeals in setting, dwelling; and use—and not alone from the designer's intention.[2] Historians of gardens and landscape architecture tell us of those makers of places past who tried earnestly to create landscapes in which meaning would be apparent and understood. At times relying on iconography and inscription, the creators of these gardens and parts sought to convey to the visitor a message as well as a sensuous impression. Within the garden confines, the visitor would take pause, and perhaps ponder the meaning of existence or at least his or her part of it. Since the visitor, owner, and maker tended to share class and culture, intelligible communication was feasible.

These are only a few examples of the interests that have surfaced in the last decade and that have appeared in numerous publications. Principal among them, *The Meanings of Gardens,* edited by Mark Francis and Randolph Hester, Jr., in 1989 collected a series of essays that ranged in topic from religion to pop culture, from sex to pets, and geographically from Israel to Norway.[3] In the book, authors drawn from diverse disciplines questioned the significance of the landscapes we create; there were no generic conclusions, although the essays were somewhat neatly arranged under the headings of idea, place, and action. In a 1988 essay titled "From Sacred Grove to Disney World: The Search for Garden Meaning," Robert Riley also tracked the search for meaning—and its loss over time—and concluded: "Gardens have been a locus of meaning in many cultures, but not in modern America."[4]

What are we to make of all these renewed attempts to discern meaning in landscapes? Is it really possible to build into landscape architecture a semantic dimension that communicates the maker's intention to the inhabitant? If so, how? In addition, *should* we try to reveal meaning in environments, and if so, why? Where does the audience enter the process? Admittedly, this is notoriously treacherous territory, and every author begins—and often ends—by hedging his or her bets. Laurie Olin stressed the "daunting" task of defining meaning and suggested that there were two broad categories in which the term was positioned. The first he termed "natural" or "evolutionary": "Generally these related to aspects of the landscape as a setting for society and have been developed as a reflection or expression of hopes and fears for survival and perpetuation."[5] More simply stated, significance accrues through use and custom. Olin's second category, and the arena in which most designers operate, concerned synthetic or invented meanings, and it is these to which he devotes most of his essay and criticism.[6] My own effort will probably be no different from that of almost all previous writers in that I will discuss the question of significance without precisely defining it.[7] To some degree this lacuna is problematic, in other

ways it may not be so troublesome.[8] I would like to think that we can discuss the meaning of meaning in landscape without a definition applicable to all landscape circumstances. Or at least I will operate under that premise. We can at least establish a broad theater in which meaning is taken simply as an integral aspect of human lives, beyond any basic attachment to the land through familiarity. Meaning thus comprises ethics, values, history, affect, all of them taken singly or as a group.

We could first try to establish *why* the pursuit of meaning has resurfaced at the close of the twentieth century. One reason might be the rejection of history, and all the baggage it carried, by those formulating a modern(ist) American landscape design in the late 1930s. Unlike their European colleagues, who continually confronted history in the world around them, American designers often started with a relatively clean slate. James Rose and Garrett Eckbo, among other writers, aggressively challenged the value of history as a lexicon of styles or typologies to be unquestioningly applied to contemporary problems and projects. Like their architectural contemporaries, they looked forward to solving problems of open space and form, and not backward to any book of given solutions. The received body of historical landscape architecture was taken as meaningless because its significance belonged to other places and other times.[9]

Rose, probably borrowing from the Canadian-Englishman Christopher Tunnard, argued for what he termed a "structural" use of plants: vegetation selected for a given climatic zone, but configured to create spaces to be used from within rather than to be viewed from without.[10] A continuing theme in Eckbo's writings well into the 1950s was the condemnation of the axis, which had "run out of gas in the seventeenth century."[11] Like Rose, Eckbo envisioned an enriched landscape configured for use, rather than one restricted to a linear spatial structure based on formal principles.

There was little or no discussion of meaning in these writings, as there was—quite remarkably—no argument for any specific vocabulary. Significance derived from forms and spaces appropriate to their use and times; meaning was a by-product, or so the text implied. Although the zigzag was a popular feature in the gardens of Eckbo and Thomas Church, and the biomorphism of Jean Arp and Isamu Noguchi informed much postwar California garden design, no published texts connected these idioms with either modern art or the modern era—or argued for their significance.[12] In fact, very little was written specifically about syntax—that is, the relationship between the elements—much less about semantic production.

Landscape writings of the period paralleled—almost always with a bit of a time lag—discourse on modern architecture. Sigfried Gideon, the central theorist for what came to be termed the International Style, rationalized the new architectural vocabulary by setting it against spatially vital architectures past.[13] The modernist art critic Clement Greenberg saw painting first and foremost as marks upon a canvas and found its culmination in nonobjective works; Gideon saw in modernist building the culmination of architecture as space.[14] In so doing, he actually recast history to accord with a twentieth-century vantage point. In anthropological terms, he was etic rather than emic, that is, looking at the subject from beyond its cultural limits rather than on its own terms. While a vast repertoire of Western architecture had accumulated over time, to Gideon its quest had ultimately been spatial rather than stylistic, and as such it reached a fruition in the modern era. Because he found space more central to architecture than either iconography or human affect, Gideon was more focused on architectonics (that is, an architectural syn-

tax) than on semantics. Or perhaps he saw as synonymous significance and the means of spatial production. Eckbo's *Landscape for Living* of 1950 provided the modernist argument with its text and laid out the concerns and parameters for modern landscape architecture.[15] More fully developed in breadth and depth than earlier writings by either Tunnard or Rose, Eckbo's work reinforced the need for reflecting time and place and human presence in landscape architecture: but there was no discussion of what it meant.

In many ways, the next major ideological and highly polemical tract was Ian McHarg's *Design with Nature,* published in 1966. Focused on the evolving study of natural ecology and rooted in landscape management, McHarg cited the natural world as the only viable source of landscape design. His text provided landscape architects with sufficient moral grounds for almost completely avoiding decisions of design—if design be taken as the conscious shaping of landscape rather than its stewardship. No talk of meaning here, only of natural processes and a moral imperative.[16] Olin, among others, has pointed out that design decision normally derive from a greater complexity of factors than those of ecology alone, among them social and cultural issues including aesthetics, and he cautions: "This chilling, close-minded stance of moral certitude is hostile to the vast body of work produced through history, castigating it as 'formal' and as representing the dominance of humans over nature."[17] McHarg mixed science with evangelism—a sort of eco-fundamentalism as it is sarcastically known by some parties—taking no prisoners and allowing no quarter.

The McHargian view was focused to the point of being exclusive, confusing two rather different arenas of landscape intervention modulation as if they were one.[18] To manage a region without thorough "scientific" investigation and analysis would be fatuous, if not dangerous. Viable design begins with study and analysis. But the planning process rarely requires the active form making that is central to landscape architecture. Reams of analysis and overlays will establish the parameters for making a garden for a suburban backyard, but they will hardly provide the design. McHarg's method insinuated that if the process were correct, the form would be good, almost as if an aesthetic automatically resulted from objective study. Presumably, meaning would accompany the resulting landscape. The 1960s and the 1970s were dominated by attempts to rationalize the practices of architecture and landscape architecture, giving favor to social utility rather than the pursuit of form or meaning. By the end of the decade, however, the limits to this way of thinking, coupled with an emerging desire by younger landscape architects to again become visible, began to generate a reaction to the anti-aesthetic and antisemantic climates of the preceding decade.

Admittedly, this is a cursory explanation of a professional condition that derived from a complex series of interrelated factors. Landscape architecture is, after all, part of a cultural, technical, and social milieu and as such is informed by a multitude of factors and considerations. But . . .

II

During the 1980s, declarations of meanings began to accompany the published photos and drawings of landscape designs. At conferences, landscape architects would describe their intentions, their sources, and what the designs meant. Some authors merely claimed they were touching base once again with the vernacular matrix in which High Style design was embedded. Martha Schwartz, for example, reexamined the materials of the ordinary landscape and the typologies of the small, private garden and the shopping center. George Har-

greaves spoke of a perceptually complex space at Harlequin Plaza in Inglewood, Colorado, from 1984, although he shied away from making direct claims about its meaning(s). The emerging generation of designers displayed a new interest in making form; and many of them claimed that these new forms would be meaningful. In reviewing landscape architecture from almost two decades, I have found it helpful to classify five roughly framed approaches to landscape design and, by extension, to significance, used by the makers or their critics: the Neoarchaic, the Genius of the Place, the Zeitgeist, the Vernacular Landscape, and the Didactic.

A sort of primitivism constituted one attempt to retrieve that which had been lost at some unspecified point along the way to modernity. Borrowing from approaches that ranged from the body works of Ana Mendieta to the stone markings of Richard Long to the theories of entropy proffered by Robert Smithson, landscape architects began to reconfigure the land in a manner we could term *Neoarchaic*. Whether the landscape architects referred directly to neolithic sources, or only to the sculptors who had drawn upon them is impossible to determine. Perhaps they tapped both resources. But in neighborhood playgrounds and in suburban office parks, one began to encounter hills coiled with spiral paths, cuts in the earth aligned with the rising or setting sun (or the solstice), circles of broken stone and clusters of scared groves. Granite steles evoking the stone circles of ancient Scandinavia—or was that England's Salisbury Plain or Easter Island?—appeared in backyards and plazas. Myriad versions of Jai Singh's eighteenth-century astronomical observatories at Delhi and Jaipur popped up like mushrooms, including one reinterpretation in a fine garden by the master Isamu Noguchi.[19] One can almost hear designers saying, sotto voce: "If they meant something in the past (of course, we have to like them as forms . . .), then they will mean something again to us today." Gary Dwyer's proposal to link the two sides of the San Andreas Fault in California with crisscrossed topographic band-aids curiously developed from the Ogham writing of the Celts is extreme to be sure—and a bit difficult to support with rational argument—but it was not at all that bizarre in the context of contemporary projects.[20] As Catherine Howett once aptly phrased it: "By the early 1980s, every landscape architect student project had been equinoxed to death."[21]

If archaicism was one school of semantic creation, the worship of the *Genius of the Place* marked a second. Alexander Pope had enjoined Lord Burlington to consult the spirit of the place as a means of rooting landscape design in a particular locale. A garden was not a universal concept to be applied uninflected upon all sites. Instead, the garden revealed the particularities of its place as well as the profundity of the garden's idea. Long driven underground by the onslaught of urbanity, suburbanity, and modern technology, the genius was a bit hesitant to reemerge into the twentieth-century sunlight and, as a result, came out squinting. A renewed cult figure, the genius—or what was left of him or her—could be consulted in many places in only a desultory way, since "the place" had been so disturbed over the centuries by industrial development. While writers such as Christian Norberg-Schultz based their discussion of the genius and place in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and others decried the rise of placelessness, designers often adopted a more superficial approach to connect human inhabitants to their landscape setting.[22]

History became an image to be dusted off and applied to any current proposal as a means to validate it. In a glance over the shoulder of history, the tiny urban park was planted with prairie grass to show what vegetation had once thrived there. Like the caged animal

in the zoo, however, an urban prairie is hardly a prairie at all; it is an urban garden planted with unmown grass and little else. Since the frame for reading—that is to say its context—has been so drastically altered, the subject of view is not easily understood as a reference to the past by contemporary citizens. The grass has been reduced from an inherent and meaningful component of early settlement to a design, or at best museological, element; a plastic or metal plaque normally provides its meaning to the residents with credits to the designer, the sponsoring body (usually a benevolent foundation for Green America), and of course the mayor in office at the time. Still, passersby wonder quietly to themselves: "When are they going to cut that lawn? I'm sure there are rats and Lord knows what else living in it. And they should water it; it looks dead."[23]

The presence of the genius is a bit more obvious in the undisturbed land, but there is precious little of that around these days; the genius is hardly unaffected by changes in atmosphere and climate. Still, the genius provides major support for landscape design and its rationalization today. Technically, studies of vegetation, hydrology, soil conditions, and the like are indeed the basis of design. But do these suggest a significant form for the design? If there is a stand of oaks, do you plant more oaks? Or should the stand be complemented by another species that even to the untrained eye appears to be foreign to the site?[24] So much of landscape architecture in the past has been created to *overcome* what the genius of the place offered the "unimproved" land—for example, by bringing water to the desert or by constructing conditioned enclosures to grow oranges in colder climates—that it is obvious that the genius's ambiguous advice can be taken rather freely. In instances such as the Patio of the Oranges in Seville, the human contrivance of irrigation was elevated to an art form, creating a garden of exceptional pleasure, refinement, and calm. Needless to say, this was not an approach to xeriscape using native plants; admittedly, it was collective and religious, rather than an anonymous, private, vernacular garden. But this courtyard, like other pieces of greenery and water in arid climates, nevertheless illustrates that, while one should consult Genius and Company, one need not accept the advice in precisely the manner it was given. Like any consultation, the information must be evaluated and some decisions need to be made, including those of form.

Buried within this approach to shaping the landscape is the belief that reflecting a preexisting condition creates a design more meaningful to the inhabitants. But I'm not sure. Many of them were not even on the planet at the time the land was pristine. I recently heard a project presentation that noted that as the principal concept for a natural preserve the designers and clients had recently restored the historical ecology and its pattern. That they had also created a pond where none had existed—assumedly as much for the visitors as for the birds that were to be lured to this reserve—was passed over without question. It is difficult to fault the good intentions of restoring disturbed wetlands. But why does the original pattern need to be "restored," when in fact the reserve serves as much for human recreation as it does for open space preservation? Is it because the "natural" pattern, masquerading as nature, is less open to question by client and visitor alike? Or could it be that the designers somewhat defensively do not believe that the natural pattern can be improved upon and brought into greater accord with the new uses and the drift of the times? Or is it a conscious or unconscious harking back to received picturesque values? Does the genius really grant significance or just point out the easiest path to follow, what in the zoological world is called a "target of opportunity"?

Approach number three borrows from related disciplines, which suggests a belief in

the Zeitgeist (that is, "the spirit of the times") as a determining force for any aspect of contemporary culture. If artists, and the battery of cultural critics who support and explain their work, have produced a body of work deemed illustrative of the spirit of our times, then landscapes designed with contemporary art-like elements must share that significance. Such an approach intersects at times with the Neoarchaic, particularly in recent years when a new regard for prehistory has informed at least one major strain of art making.[25]

The boulders that constitute Peter Walker's Tanner Fountain at Harvard from 1984 bear a striking resemblance to those Carl Andre had neatly arranged in his Stone Field Sculpture in Hartford, Connecticut, some seven years earlier. Andre, in spite of his ultraminimalist proclivities, had actually consulted the genius in creating the work, choosing a range of stone types from the surrounding area as the basic material of the installation. (Because the rocks had been removed from their native context, however, this fact required a written or verbal explanation.) Walker's stones are all more or less the same size and species, and their circular configuration—like certain elements of his IBM Solana, Texas, campus—cites rather directly the work of sculptor Richard Long. Certainly an aesthetic transformation has resulted; neither the fountain nor courtyard design is plagiarized. But much of their novelty and appeal, at least at the time of their initiation, derive from their seeming correlation with art forms of the times. From sculpture, the designer receives both the instigation of ideas and, to some degree, of validation. Landscape architecture becomes in the process a part of the ethos of the era, and its own identity as an art is confirmed.

Perhaps the most prominent recent example of the Zeitgeist approach is the 1988 Parc de la Villette in Paris, won in competition by Bernard Tschumi. Bounded on one edge by the Périphérique (ring road), described by architectural historian Norma Evenson as the concrete moat that surrounds Paris,[26] the site was offered little by the Genius Loci, and a Didactic (see below) approach would have demanded a strong evocation of the site's history or even the reinstitution of the slaughtering that once existed on the site.[27] Instead, Tschumi used ideas of cinematic sequences and poststructural theories concerning the fragmentation of postmodern culture as sources for the park's design. The "outmoded" concept of park was supposedly dissolved by this new idea, instead producing a design that effaced the boundary between city and park and eliminated the hard line between built and green zones.

The drawings used to explain the competition design were brilliantly conceived and included an exploded axonometric view that masterfully conveyed the design concept of point, line, and surface—a visual equivalent of a sound bite. Unfortunately, parks are rarely seen from the air, and even less frequently as exploded entities. In fact, as a totality, the noncomposition recalls too closely the bland and amorphous open spaces of Paris's *grand ensembles* (housing projects) of the 1950s and 1960s. La Villette's red follies, while intriguing as investigations of architectural form, do little to energize the park's sensual appeal beyond the visual. Ultimately there is precious little of genuine, that is to say *experiential*, interest as landscape architecture on the site. Basically, the landscape comprises some lawn and some trees.[28] The ideas used to conceive the park are rich and evocative; the experience on site is limited and spatially uninteresting, however. At what point does concept end and experience begin? Is an intriguing concept sufficient to create meaning in the minds of the beholders? What of the beholder not privy to the designer's convoluted explanation? The Parc de la Villette illustrates the problems that plague borrowing parallel ideas or forms from other disciplines, and the distortion that often accompanies translation. In this par-

ticular Parisian example, what has been written about the project is far more intriguing than what one encounters on site.[29] The success or failure of such landscape designs does not ultimately derive from their intellectual origins, but whether they "work" on their own merits as places and landscapes without recourse to jargon and verbal explanations. One might also ask in the end: What is the nature of the pleasure they provide?

Like architects such as Robert Venturi and Frank Gehry, landscape architects such as Martha Schwartz also look at the *Vernacular Landscape.* This is a hip glance at the Genius of the Place, of course, but the genius is culturalized and the selections suave. The vernacular is a rich source of materials and forms; after all, it constitutes the "real" world in which we dwell. But just as the meanings of historical landscapes are affected by reframing, the Vernacular Landscape is inevitably transformed when borrowed by design professionals. And when vernacular elements reappear in High Style projects, they have semantically virtually nothing in common with their sources. They have been reframed. The vernacular environment is treated by designers as a quarry for raw materials to be reconfigured and thus transfigured. The unselfconsciousness, the appropriate sense of the makeshift and the accepted transience of vernacular building are usually lost along the way.[30] A glass gazing ball optically enlarges the confines of a small backyard garden, while serving as a sign of neighborly propriety. When it is extracted from the backyard, repeated at length, and arranged in a grid, however, only the basic reflective properties remain unaffected. Similarly, a concrete frog accompanying a cement deer and perhaps a gnome are tender companions in an intimate setting. Multiplied by the hundreds and painted gold, they are no longer the common vernacular element they once were, but fodder for High Style designers. This is not to say they possess no merit of their own, they do; but the meaning is no longer vernacular. Like fine wine, significance does not travel very well, and wine *is* different from grape juice.

The fifth approach to "constructed meaning" goes down the *Didactic* path. This is the one I have found most appealing, and one that has formed the only more or less stable leg of anything our office has tried to design. In fact, it was the observation by a friend while examining a current project that made me realize that much of what we do is a somewhat desperate search for meaning in landscape.[31] The Didactic approach dictates that forms should tell us, in fact instruct us, about the natural workings or history of the place. This is related—as all the approaches are to some degree—to the Genius Loci school, but the Didactic is usually more overt in its intentions. Not only should we consult the genius about its basis, but our resultant project should render an exegesis on what the genius told us.

Curiously, we often try to restore what has been previously destroyed. Perhaps a stream long culverted and buried is restored to its "original" state (of course, it really isn't—everything has changed around it). One of the rules formulated by Joel Garreau in *Edge City* is that one names a place for the features that have been destroyed to make room for the new development.[32] Shady Hills Estates commemorates the trees that were cut to build the houses, and the natural undulations that were flattened to make construction less challenging; and incidentally, the houses are hardly estates. But like the photo caption, the name of the development directs our reading of the place and asks us to complete that which is missing in the picture. A design didactically conceived, like the photo caption, is both informative—possibly normative—and certainly directive. The "factual" base is intended to validate the designer's work.

A Didactic landscape is supposedly an aesthetic textbook on natural, or in some cases

urban, processes. Alexandre Chemetoff's sunken bamboo garden at La Villette purposefully allowed the elements of urban infrastructure to remain, reminding the visitor that this small, green respite was actually but a fragment of an urban agglomeration that to exist required massive amounts of servicing. Water mains, sewer pipes, and electrical ducts crisscross the site; the retain walls are constructed of precast concrete elements commonly used to support the walls of adjacent sites during excavation for new construction. The landscape architect did not leave these elements of infrastructure untouched, however; the scheme itself developed in relation as a give-and-take between the didactic exposure of services and its aesthetic complement in wispy green and gold foliage. Sculptors—who almost by definition are allowed to consider the aesthetic parameter in isolation—have also created places structured on the Didactic dimension. At the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration in Seattle, Washington, for example, Douglas Hollis's Sound Garden (1983) captured the wind to activate an environmental organ; the vanes aligning the field of erect pipes into the gusts added a visual signal of wind direction. Here, the presence of the wind was thus given both aural and visual expression.

In these two instances, the work of landscape art addressed either natural or urban process with an assumption—which I have since come to suspect—that designs revealing these processes are both more viable and more meaningful. I don't think the answer is quite that simple. Didactic thinking provides a good point of departure for the work, but the success of the place ultimately hinges on the skill and care with which the design is made and on what it offers the visitor. Didacticism per se is not enough. (In these two instances, however, the final success of the resulting works did not depend on its Didactic aspects alone.)

And then there is the *Theme Garden*. It is curious to me how many people deride the world's Disneylands and other theme parks, and then propose Theme Gardens. A theme, in this context, constitutes a perceptually apparent idea used to fashion the garden's form. Roses, Mother Goose, the color yellow, or even electric light could all be used as themes, and I imagine that all of them have been used as such somewhere at some time. One could argue that the gamut of themes deriving from horticultural or environmental ideas or cultural borrowings are inherently more genuine than the contrived imagery of a theme park created in plaster or plastic, but they are themes nonetheless.[33]

A theme, it must be admitted, is not necessarily an argument for significance, but there is an underlying assertion of validity that accompanies any obvious concept. Even today, the landscape professional can accept a Chinese garden, for example that by Fletcher Steele at Naumkeag, or the copper tents at Frederik Magnus Piper's eighteenth-century Haga Park in Stockholm. Perhaps we use the word "charming" rather than "beautiful" to qualify them. If well done, in fact, the effect of the pavilion or cultural borrowing is far greater than its semantic theme. It can be pleasant, calming, restful, stimulating in its own right; that is, it can affect us. Which tells us something about the experiential dimensions of the garden.

The white garden at Sissinghurst is a well-known example of color used as a subject, but the themed approach is widespread in time and place. The recently opened Parc André Citroën in Paris includes "black" and "white" gardens, although in both gardens green seems to be the predominant color that meets the eye. One could argue that the restriction to a single color suggests a poverty of horticultural invention or an overly zealous pursuit of minimalism. It can also, of course, create a garden of stunning beauty, employing incredible horticultural acrobatics and subtle chromatic mixtures even with a single color range.

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Gilles Clément, the landscape architect for a considerable section of the park, has also applied his idea of a "garden in movement" to one of its riverside zones. Here, a score of wild flowers and grasses has been planted with little regard as to where or to which will survive. Paths through these meadows will be determined by human movement rather than by formal design; the paths will fix the traces of occupation and use. This Darwinian approach to park design, which joins the Didactic and the Theme with instructive aesthetic consequences, addresses both the social issues brought to the fore in the 1960s and aspects of urban ecology. While these parts of the park will evolve in terms of horticultural species—and over time run the risk of looking like a vacant lot—they suggest the human presence only through a relatively few wooden seating platforms raised slightly above the ground. The idea of replicating evolution to establish an appropriate urban landscape is engaging, although the form may not be attractive at all times. But do such replications mean anything to anyone today?[34]

III

Is it really possible to imbue a place with meaning from the outset? It would seem that history tells us yes, if the users possess sufficient experience in common. For one, significance is culturally circumscribed and, ultimately, personally determined.[35] If we examine a Chinese poem executed in ink on silk, as nonreaders of the Chinese language we are denied access to the poem's linguistic dimension. Should we be uninitiated into Chinese calligraphy, and the propriety and taste conveyed by the chosen style, the marks will have even less meaning to us. We can appreciate the work solely on its formal dimension, of course, as fluid black marks on a white ground. It is obvious, however, that possessing linguistic abilities in Chinese would enrich both our understanding and our pleasure: the two-dimensional writing on the page would acquire multiple semantic dimensions.

The same is true of gardens. The uninitiated may or may not appreciate a dry Zen garden for its formal properties alone, for the pattern of its raked sand and the composition of its rocks, but the meanings of the garden will remain communicated imperfectly at best. The absence of many of the elements that say "garden" to members of foreign cultures denies access to meaning as the mores deny access to physical entry.[36]

The Zen garden provides a valuable case study for considering the construction of meaning. Japan's centuries of cultural homogeneity fostered an attitude toward simplicity as the compression of complexity (rather than its reduction or elimination, as it has been in the West). One could say, with perhaps only a little exaggeration, that until recently a Japanese of a certain class-educational level could understand the intentions behind the making of the garden. He or she could appreciate the framing of the space, the nongeometric order within the enclosure, the quality of the rocks and their arrangement, the shaping of shrubs, the almost complete absence of brilliantly flowering species. Unless a person is initiated into Zen doctrine, however, the meaning as the embodiment of religious belief, and as possibly intended by the gardenist, would remain beyond comprehension. And since Zen reflects continually back on the self for understanding and ultimately enlightenment, there is an implicit denial of meaning within the garden itself. Instead, the garden stimulates individual contemplation; it can be seen as a vehicle for understanding the self rather than the place. The meaning of the garden is nonmeaning. In Zen belief, the place bears no meaning per se, but can perhaps evoke a call for meaning within the individual.

Allusions to worlds beyond the garden in place and time have appeared with some regularity in the polite traditions of landscape design in both East and West.[37] Replicas or recollections of Roman temples often appeared in the English landscape garden. At Katsura Rikyu in Kyoto, a small spit of water-worn stones was intended to cast the visitor's musings toward the peninsula of Ama-no-hashidate, long regarded as one of Japan's most outstanding shoreline landscapes. The shorn bamboo-covered slope at Koraku-en in today's Tokyo, on the other hand, specifically invoked the Mountain of the Chinese Immortals. Unlike the abstract Zen landscapes that were intended to summon a multitude of (ultimately personal) interpretations and associations, the aristocratic villa gardens often established intimations of legend and land. Meaning accrued from allusions to real or mythic geography outside the immediate landscape.

John Dixon Hunt has cogently argued that the world of the English landscape garden, like many garden traditions before it, was a coherent system of signs devised to be legible to both maker and visitor.[38] Here the signs were made tangible: a temple based on a Roman predecessor, a vale with mythological reference, an architectonic emblem of Englishness. References could be manifest in a landscape feature, a structure, or even a written inscription to reduce ambiguity. Although falling under the common heading of signification, they actually concern two structures of meaning, differentiated in time. The first regarded the production of meaning used at the time of the garden's creation and its effect(iveness) on the visitor. The second concerned the greater orbit of meaning that is part of the garden as institution and semiotic constellation. "Gardens, too, mean rather than are," claims this garden historian. "Their various signs are constituted of all the elements that compose them—elements of technical human intervention like terraces or the shape of flowerbeds, elements of nature like water and trees—but they are nonetheless signs, to be read by outsiders in time and space for what they tell of a certain society.[39] Hunt also states, at first seemingly in contradiction with what he has written earlier in the essay, that even the most specific of references (probably textual ones) become time worn and lose their significance: "Castle Howard and Rousham provide excellent examples of garden experience we have totally lost. We no longer see a representation of English landscape; we just see it."[40]

Any symbolic system demands education and the comprehension of both the medium and the message. One might understand, for example, that Diana was the goddess of the chase and even know of her association with the moon, but still might have absolutely no idea why her likeness stands in the garden. Were we unaware of Louis XIV's self-association with the sun, would we not believe Versailles to be a glorious homage to cloudy France's sunshine lost or to Apollo himself? We have lost the ability to read the original intensions, but we can still decipher the original garden elements on our own contemporary terms. That these two worlds of meaning mutate over time suggests that meaning is indeed dynamic and ever-changing.[41] It also suggests that the meaning with which the designer believes he or she is investing the garden may have only minimal impact in the beginning, and even less in years to come. On the other hand, the designer does have power over the artifact and its immediate effect on the sense—and its potential to mean.

Communications theory tells us that the two parties in conversation mush share a common semantic channel or there will be no communication; no meaning. Can the garden operate as such a channel, and does the designer possess the power to create a significant landscape, especially given the multitude of communication channels in today's pluralis-

tic world? When a society is relatively homogenized, the task is far easier because the designer shares the values and belief system of the people. Folk cultures produce places that are almost immediately communicative, and communicative over long periods. Because their connections between form and intention are understood within the culture and evolve only slowly over time, it is possible for the makers, the people, and the meaning of place to remain in contact.[42]

The Woodland Cemetery outside Stockholm, designed between 1915 and 1940 by Gunnar Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz, tapped into the religious and value systems of the Swedish Lutheran congregants. This landscape of remembrance has remained both meaningful to its parishioners and appreciated by them from the time of its realization. The triumph of the cemetery lies not only in its magnificent joining of architecture and landscape, and the modulated juncture of re-formed land with the existing pine forest, but also in its ability to conjure a sense of sanctity without relying on overt Christian iconography. Perhaps the power of this funeral landscape ultimately derives from an almost animistic feeling of pre-Christianity that addresses the forest, the land, and the heavens as a primeval setting. Perhaps the design also tapped into something basic to Swedish religion and culture. It might still be possible to create a landscape equally attuned to its time and place today, when Swedish society is far more diverse. But is would be far more difficult to devise the forms and symbols that would resonate within the contemporary Swedish population in quite the same way.[43] Not that it was ever easy; but it was easier earlier in the century. The communication channels are no longer so few, nor are the elements of the Swedish landscape so simple.

To summarize:

> Can a (landscape) designer help make a significant place? Yes.
>
> Can a (landscape) designer design significance into the place at the time of its realization? No, or let's say, no longer.

When the society was homogeneous and shared a common system of belief, when the symbolic system was endemic, when the makers of places operated unselfconsciously fully within the culture, it was possible.[44] But even then, meaning was enriched through habit and the passage of time. Given the fragmentation of contemporary American society, and especially with its current emphasis on difference, the concord necessary for instant meaning is, to say the least, deficient.

Since a commissioning body might include meaningfulness as part of its brief, why commission a (landscape) designer?

Of course, there are the pragmatic aspects of design that can best be addressed by those with an education, technical knowledge, and experience. One also hopes that the landscape architect possesses equal skill in understanding people and culture, as well as horticulture and form. Creating significant landscapes remains a quest of the profession, as well it should. But calling attention to Celtic inscriptions, solar alignments, the spirit of the place, the Zeitgeist, the vernacular landscape, or even a didactic lesson in the derivation of form does not create meaning. Providing symbols is not the same as creating meaningful places, although it may be one point along the path. To my mind significance lies with the beholder and not alone in the place. Meaning accrues over time; like respect, it is earned, not granted. While the designer yearns to establish a landscape that will acquire significance, it is not possi-

ble to use pat symbols alone as a means to transmute syntax into semantics, that is, tectonics into meaning.[45]

Familiarity and affect are not quite the same as significance, although they can serve as vehicles for its creation. To recall the site of one's first camping trip, or the park where the football championship was won, or even the flowers of one's family home ground establish associations among place, act, and form that cohere in landscape meaning. If these places were designed by landscape architects, all well and good. Meaning condenses at the intersection of people and place, and not alone in the form the designer's idea takes.

The design itself constitutes a filter that creates the difference between what the designer intends and what the visitor experiences. This is the difference between the intended perception and the perceived intention. Differences in culture, in education, in life experience, in our experience of nature will all modify our perception of the work of landscape architecture. While this transaction between people and place is never completely symmetrical, I do believe that we can circumscribe the range of possible reactions to a designed place. We cannot make that place mean, but we can, I hope, instigate reactions to the place that will fall within the desired confines of happiness, gloom, joy, contemplation, or delight. This range of possible reactions, while tempered by cultural norms and personal experience, is still physiologically dependent on the human body. The limits of thermal comfort, the olfactory faculty, the capability to perceive chroma and natural process, and our basic size are characteristics shared by virtually every human inhabitant of the planet. Could we not start with these physical senses rather than with the encultured mind? Could we not make the place pleasurable?

IV

In historical garden literature, a considerable amount of text describes the pleasure of the garden, that is, its comfort, its delight, its sense of well-being. The pleasures of the imperial palace garden backdrop the rather limited action and plot development in the twelfth-century *Tale of Genji*. Pleasure and its appreciation were so much a part of gardens in the past that we can well wonder why landscape architects today seek significance rather than pleasure. Could it be that pleasure is trite, hedonistic, and ephemeral, while meaning is deep and long-lasting? Or perhaps pleasure seems to be too solitary an enterprise, while meaning is taken as collective embodiment of values? Or is it that meaning is the dimension that distinguishes landscape architecture from mere "gardening"?

Roland Barthes argued that to read is to seek the pleasure of the text. He tells us that, to provide pleasure, "The text must prove to me *that it desires me*" (italics in the original).[46] Knowledge, a magnificent use of language, plot, linguistic constructions all contribute to the ultimate goal: the pleasure of reading. Is it not possible to believe that pleasure is one of the necessary entry points to significance (certainly, horror would be another as the sublime school once believed, but our quotidian world seems to provide enough of that)?

It seems curious to me that, in most professional design publications, the aspect of pleasure is almost completely missing from the discourse, while it thrives in popular gardening magazines and in seed catalogs. This is not to say that pursuit of pleasure is not a part of professional work; one assumes that park design, for example, is to a large degree predicated upon the contented use of its grounds. But a discussion of pleasure is rarely a part of trade and academic writing. Professional publications often talk of the site, the client,

the plant materials, perhaps the particular ecological system or cleverness on the designer's part in solving a particularly thorny drainage problem. More recently, some discussion of the alignment of the garden's axis to the summer solstice or its relation to some geomantic construction might also come into play. The lay publications, in contrast, discuss the delight of the garden and that making one is so easy—like summer cooking recipes—you can do it in, or to, your own backyard. Color and fragrance and delight are givens; and it is the perfect place for a barbecue. Magazines such as *Sunset* have expanded the world of the house and the garden to the world of lifestyle.

Today might be a good time to once more examine the garden in relation to the senses, while putting conscious mental rationalizations on the back burner—to create a mixed metaphor. Although the world's peoples vary greatly in terms of linguistic and cultural matrices, we do share roughly similar human senses, although admittedly these can be honed or dimmed by culture. Is there not a link between the senses and significance, or is meaning necessarily restricted to the rational faculties. Barthes would argue that there is a connection. "What is significance?" he writes; "it is meaning, *insofar as it is sensually produced*" (italics in the original).[47]

When an interlocutor once accused Charles Eames of designing furniture only for himself, the designer openly admitted that he did. But he did not design for what was idiosyncratic to himself alone, but for a self indicative of the greater population of chair users. Why not try to reinject the same sense of pleasing the individual or self into the landscape design? I do not talk here of Gaia and other forms of touchy-feely expression that constitute yet another form of Neoarchaicism—since telephone lines have superseded ley lines—but of trying to understand at what level our experience can be shared by others. Not as an abstract symbolic system referring back to Celtic times, but places—and ideas—that acknowledge our time, our sensitivities, and our people. This takes more than a pseudosignificant landscape loaded with the designer's explanatory voice-over, or captions built into the landscape itself. It would seem that a designer could create a landscape of pleasure that in itself would become significant. "Art should not simply speak to the mind *through* the senses," wrote Goethe, "it must also satisfy the senses themselves."[48]

There are various arguments for a concern for pleasure in garden design.[49] For one—at running the risk of sounding too Californian—pleasure can be a valuable pursuit in itself, as valid as the pursuit of meaning. Even Vitruvius constructed his triad of desirable architectural qualities on commodity, firmness, and delight.[50] In the past, sensory pleasures have served to condition meaning. Consider the expression of taste in the selection and arrangement of cut flowers in Japan or the ecstasy of religious experience that underwrote so much Counter-Reformation art and architecture. Sensory experience *moved* the viewer, causing him or her to reflect upon religious meaning as well as one's position in the universe—powerful stuff indeed. Third, despite the influence of culture, individual physiological characteristics, and even transitory psychological states, pleasure is still more predictable than meaning. As in the past, and despite the collapse of collective social norms, pleasure may provide a more defined path toward meaning than the erudite approaches to landscape design discussed earlier in this essay.

Significance, I believe, is not a designer's construct that benignly accompanies the completion of construction. It is not the product of the maker, but is, instead, created by the receivers. Like a patina, significance is acquired only with time. And like a patina, it emerges only if the conditions are right.