

The Landscape Urbanism Reader

A REVIEW BY GALE FULTON

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In the preface to the 2003 edition of his book, *The New Realities*, management thinker Peter Drucker suggests that much of the character of the next half-century has been provided for us by the events of the last half-century. Drucker goes on to say that ‘decision-makers’ of all sorts, to operate effectively in this new milieu, must come to terms with this ‘*future that has already happened*’.¹ Indeed, on surveying the radical changes brought about on a global scale since the 1960s – such as postmodernism, a ‘third wave’ of globalisation, the world’s population surging towards seven billion, the explosion of digital technology, and global environmental destabilisation – it becomes readily apparent that an understanding of such events is crucial for decision-making in the flux which defines landscape and urbanism today. It is from this milieu that the ideas and practices bundled in *The Landscape Urbanism Reader* have emerged, and it is for their desire and ability to critically analyse and contextualise these forces that the essays in this book are most valuable. For what the most effective essays in this reader do well is to survey the events, trends and forces shaping the urban landscape now, but with the additional understanding of these forces from an historical or genealogical perspective as well. In this way the essays set the stage for a landscape of urbanism which is essentially temporal and which cannot be understood outside initial conditions and complex ecologies of force.

Charles Waldheim’s *The Landscape Urbanism Reader* is a collection of 14 essays which range widely in their discussion of urban landscapes and the processes which have led to their formation. Waldheim, the Associate Dean and Director of the Landscape Architecture Program at the University of Toronto, has been at the centre of landscape urbanism since its ‘official’ emergence in 1996. Waldheim introduces the book as a collection of essays gathered from across ‘a range of disciplines internationally, to articulate the origins and aspirations of this burgeoning field of cultural production’ which aim to put forth a ‘new language’ capable of coming to terms with ‘the rapidly changing context for landscape in discussions of the contemporary city’ (p 16). At the core of landscape urbanist thinking is the belief that the city has in many ways become more like landscape than it is like city – or at least the dense, vertical city that still occupies the dominant place in our cultural

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imagination. This being the case, landscape urbanists argue for a shift away from the discrete, architectural object as the primary organising device of the city, as is so often found in mainstream architectural and urban design approaches to the city. The landscape urbanist alternative, though (and this is a crucial point that many of the movements detractors still fail to grasp), is not simply advocating 'landscapes' in urbanisation – the designed objects found between buildings and exemplified in urban plazas, nineteenth-century parks, and ornamental plantings – but a radical shift in practices that draws from those characteristics of landscape which are best suited to more fully engage the creative forces swirling across the globe. This has perhaps been most eloquently stated by Keller Easterling in an earlier collection of essays on the subject when she states:

For so many strata of culture – from geology to network architecture to urbanism and globalization – landscape is diagram. Like a diagram, it requires no representation. Like a diagram, it has temporal parameters. Like a diagram, it is not reliant on any single artifact but rather continues to produce artifacts in time. It is an organization that is always becoming.²

Such a formulation of landscape offers additional insight to Waldheim's 'new language' in that we might best think of it as a language that has perhaps always been latent in landscape, but which has only recently begun to be fully understood and leveraged. As James Corner writes in his essay 'Terra Fluxus', the qualities of landscape that are currently being embraced stem largely from its 'conceptual scope; with its capacity to theorize sites, territories, ecosystems, networks, and infrastructures, and to organize large urban fields. In particular, thematics of organization, dynamic interaction, ecology, and technique point to a looser, emergent urbanism, more akin to the real complexity of cities and offering an alternative to the rigid mechanisms of centralist planning' (p 23). The significance of these reformulations – albeit still unresolved physically – demonstrate a profound reconsideration, and thereby a speculative springboard, for an evolved set of landscape practices which move beyond simplistic notions of city form, urban space, and design process, towards a renovated and expanded arsenal of theories, techniques, models, and eventual types of landscapes that underlie, separate, connect, exfoliate, amplify and resist those more traditional objects of urbanism.

Waldheim characterises the book as a 'reference manifesto', which is a departure from so many ahistorical modernist manifestos in that this one is expected to 'describe emergent conditions before they fully clarify themselves while simultaneously document(ing) their various sources and referents' (p 16). This is a clever tactic on the part of the editor as it aligns well with some of the most compelling essays of the volume which seem to mimic (or precede?) this model as they chart various histories of urbanisation as well as speculate about what could or should happen next. Waldheim also refers to the book as an 'anthology', taken here to mean a group of essays that hang together only loosely as they converge on their object of study, and one can think back to James Corner's *Recovering Landscape* as using a similar strategy for dealing with what is an almost impossibly

broad and complex subject. But while there are no official thematic groupings or subsections to the book, certain patterns do seem to emerge in the essays, the two most prominent of which are: (1) focused on the description of formative influences and creative potentials of the landscape urbanist movement; and (2) those essays concerned primarily with a rigorous rethinking of site.

The former group, those focused primarily on the history, theory, and potentials of the 'emerging notion' that is landscape urbanism, is kicked off with Corner's 'Terra Fluxus'. The essay begins with a brief but critical history of landscape's evolution – both as idea, and as physical artifact – in the twentieth century. Corner touches on the work and ideas of such seminal urbanist thinkers as Jens Jensen, Frederick Law Olmsted and Le Corbusier, and the mid-century musings about various 'scapes' as formulated by developer Victor Gruen. He criticises the 'naive and counterproductive' tendencies of certain environmentalist groups who resist any future scenarios not built on a sort of back-to-nature ideology (p 27). Corner then offers 'four provisional themes' which might guide landscape urbanist practice including: 'processes over time, the staging of surfaces, the operational or working method, and the imaginary' (p 28). Of particular significance, I would argue, is Corner's interest in the ongoing stimulation and expansion of the 'collective imagination'. This is important, as it signals a departure from what might be termed a 'mere' instrumentalism potentially emerging in landscape urbanist projects which focus too heavily on technique and issues of 'how' which have been a mainstay of 'post-critical' debates in some architecture circles often closely paralleling discussions in landscape urbanism. Landscape urbanism's tendencies to foreground the performative over other dominant modes of landscape practice, including the decorative and the restorative, must be careful not to throw the baby out with bathwater in as much as landscape has the capacity to function, or *perform*, in all these dimensions. As Corner states, 'Materiality, representation, and imagination are not separate worlds; political change through practices of place construction owe as much to the representational and symbolic realms as to material activities. And so it seems landscape urbanism is first and last an imaginative project, a speculative thickening of the world of possibilities' (p 32). This willingness to once again consider the more representational or symbolic aspects of landscape, echoed in essays by Richard Weller and Julia Czerniak, marks a definitive split between the Reader and its machinic predecessor, *Landscape Urbanism: A Manual for the Machinic Landscape*.³

Two essays following Corner's – Charles Waldheim's 'Landscape as Urbanism', and Grahame Shane's 'The Emergence of Landscape Urbanism', serve as useful companions to Corner's in that they cover with greater depth several more contemporary built and visionary projects, as well as publications which inform the evolution of the landscape urbanist project. Richard Weller's essay is also a sort of pseudo-history of landscape urbanism, but Weller's text echoes some of the earlier discussion of Corner's call for the continuing development of the imaginary in that Weller believes landscape urbanism to have the potential to finally bridge the

gap between art and science that has plagued landscape architecture and landscape planning since the early twentieth century. Weller argues for a landscape urbanism that combines large-scale poetics and signification (that one might derive from works such as Corner's *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape*) with McHarg's willingness to declare values and to employ methods which would instrumentalise or ground them in the creation of built landscapes at once artful, ecological and instrumental.

Representative of the second primary focus of the essays in the Reader, those generally reconsidering issues of site, are essays such as Julia Czerniak's 'Looking Back at Landscape Urbanism: Speculations on Site', Alan Berger's 'Drosscape', and Clare Lyster's 'Landscapes of Exchange: Re-articulating Site'. In each of these essays designers of the built environment are challenged to reconsider the underlying assumptions of how and where they have traditionally practised. Berger's 'Drosscape', a distillation of his 2006 book of the same name, describes a vast new territory formed primarily as a waste or byproduct of cycles of deindustrialisation of the old, core city and the reindustrialisation of the hinterlands surrounding that core. Berger argues that this landscape is still largely unseen by those professions that could best shape it in as much as it defies easy packaging as a distinct site awaiting typical programs. He advocates a new type of designer who is better adapted to opportunistically engage the dross of urbanisation from within the processes and systems of its production, as opposed to 'scavenging commissions from their jetsam as they change course'(p 214). Berger sees the potential of landscape urbanism in its ability to 'improve regional landscape deficiencies of the urban realm', which would necessitate a shift away from small-scale sites as the primary focus of design. Along with this new focus would come a 'specific agenda', which does not deny the existence of the 'big four' design disciplines (architecture, landscape architecture, urban design and planning), but instead attempts to form sensible alliances as they present themselves in the new territories of dross.

In 'Landscapes of Exchange: Re-articulating Site', Clare Lyster traces the correlation between acts of exchange and forms of public space. Lyster suggests that whereas traditional forms of public space were based on an 'act of exchange' centred on 'a single commercial event at a singularly specific geographical location', (p 223) we now see that the 'plasticity of contemporary ecologies of exchange has resulted in the relationship between public space and commerce progressing from a site/object relationship to a more organisational one that exists 'across' or between multiple sites of occupation' (p 224). Lyster analyses complex logistical events and manoeuvres, such as the informational coordination required to stage the most efficient home delivery of *Harry Potter* books, MoveOn.org's mobilisation of 'spontaneous collective responses', oftentimes eliciting large effect through extremely minimal means, and the resiliency gained via decentralisation and redundancy as found in human trafficking networks. From these contemporary landscape phenomena, Lyster advances new 'articulations of network and territory', which are immanent in such exchange networks and which offer new sites for

landscape designers to creatively colonise with programmatic or formal strategies (p 227). Lyster argues that the old forms – such as forum, street and pastoral public park – should be considered evolving, and in some cases, obsolete, forms of public space, and that landscape urbanism is not simply about the generation of new forms from the hybridisation of infrastructural-commercial-informational systems, but ‘the exploration of their social, political, and cultural impact in a reinterpretation of public space’ (p 235).

Another essay significant for its interest in the reconsideration of site is Julia Czerniak’s ‘Looking Back at Landscape Urbanism: Speculations on Site’. Czerniak’s essay begins with a critique of contemporary site practices which, she says, too often fail to understand site beyond the boundaries of building lots. Instead, she argues that we must learn to understand site as ‘relational networks of artefacts, organizations and processes that operate at diverse spatial and temporal scales’ (p 107). Czerniak revisits architect Carol Burns’ usage of the ‘cleared’ and the ‘constructed’ as ways to consider site – the first being essentially a tabula rasa condition on which a designer imposes or ‘grafts’ artefacts, while the second indicates a more subtle engagement with the site in which aspects of the site are integral in the formal and organisational strategies of the design. Turning to examples such as Hargreaves’ Guadalupe River project and Eisenman/Olin’s Rebstockpark Masterplan, Czerniak argues that site practices along the lines of the ‘constructed’, in their inevitable specificity, also lend themselves to the development of ‘landscape’s full etymology’ which includes both the performative and the significant.

While Czerniak convincingly elucidates an expanded theory of *what* designers should consider with regard to site through the projects she examines, one is left unconvinced by the formal resolution of such projects as Hargreaves’ Guadalupe River project – the *how* of the project. Since much of the criticism levied on landscape practice stems from a lack of formal resolution, an opportunity was missed in this essay (or in the inclusion of an additional essay) by failing to look even more deeply at issues of how the final form of the project was achieved. Questions raised in Czerniak’s essay have been tackled elsewhere by the likes of Sanford Kwinter and Manuel de Landa regarding hylomorphic versus morphogenetic models of form generation, and such theorisations of form are all the more important in landscape urbanist approaches as they so often assume the evolution of form in time.

The final essay of the book, ‘Public Works Practice’ by Chris Reed, revisits the moment in landscape architectural history when landscape architects relinquished control of ‘multidimensional mega-projects’ in favour of one of two typical paths: landscape design as ‘decorative art’ or as ‘science-based planning methodology’ (p 270). This abdication on the part of landscape architects led to an eventual devaluing of the role of landscape architects in large-scale public works projects, which they continue to suffer from today. But landscape urbanism, and its attendant ways of thinking about projects which are geographically large and organisationally complex, offers designers a foothold for regaining their status as essential components, if not leaders, of such projects. Reed recounts the development of

four major public works initiatives including the creation of the Hoover Dam and ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency) which offer new models of practice for twenty-first century landscape urbanists. Each of these projects witnessed innovations in technical and organisational processes, which have contributed to what Reed believes is 'a new set of professional practices characterized by an emphasis on operational and performance-driven aspects of landscape process and urbanization, and with a focus on logistics and mechanisms' (p 281). Reed sums up landscape urbanism as a 'set of ideas and frameworks' which are 'performance-based, research-oriented, logistics-focused, networked'. Those wishing to engage in projects of this type must function as 'urbanistic system-builder(s), whose interests now encompass the research, framing, design, and implementation of expansive new public works and civic infrastructures' (p 283).

While a full account of the essays included in the *Reader* is beyond what is possible in the space of this review, other compelling essays are included which serve to further illuminate the ideas and territories that landscape urbanists see as currently unclaimed by the traditional practices of other design disciplines. But despite *The Landscape Urbanism Reader's* many strengths, both the book and the emerging field of knowledge and practice that is its object of study have yet to adequately address certain issues that must be considered if it is to remain relevant as either an 'emergent notion' or an eventual discipline in its own right. Perhaps most troubling in this category is the lack of real interdisciplinarity that is demonstrated in the *Reader*. Despite the opening of the book with a quote from Roland Barthes ('Interdisciplinarity is not the calm of an easy security; it begins effectively ... when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down – perhaps even violently, via the jolts of fashion – in the interests of a new object and a new language'), it does not appear that this breakdown has yet occurred. Of the fourteen contributors to the book, eight are landscape architects and six are architects. This is not to say that several, or perhaps even all the authors, are not wide-ranging generalists who look at their respective degree certificates or professional affiliations as anachronistic, necessary evils of a time less willing or able to embrace the post-disciplinary future. But even if this is the case, one must also expect that there are thinkers of this sort in economics, ecology, sociology, art, philosophy, geography and any of several other areas of study that have a real contribution to make to the study of urbanism. If landscape urbanism is to truly be practised as collaborative and interdisciplinary in the way that Waldheim so elegantly formulates in his introductory 'Reference Manifesto', then we will have to devise strategies for practising and *publishing* which are more accommodating of the very *real* difficulties which go along with this collaborative, interdisciplinary work.

Nor does the *Reader* make any real attempt to discuss either the current state of the academy in relation to the ideas of landscape urbanists, or its potential role in the future. As an academic interested in the scale and complexity of issues which are a given in any contemporary urbanist project, I would argue that we must be willing to take a hard, and potentially uncomfortable, look at the state

of the academy in the face of twenty-first century urbanism. As architectural theorist and educator, Mark Wigley, has recently written, rather than opening up the creative potentials of architectural education to better meet the truly fantastic and unprecedented conditions of urbanism today, our schools – or the accrediting bodies which influence them – continue to be primarily concerned with regulation and standardisation. Wigley goes on to say that all too often these regulatory agencies are populated by the ‘least gifted’ who adhere so rigidly to maintaining the standard of the ‘lowest common denominator’ that it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain accreditation while also educating students in such a way that prepares them for practices which are both effective and relevant in the context of today’s realities.⁴ Obviously, the *Reader* aids in the educational dilemma by simply pointing out several new areas which should be considered for inclusion in design curricula today, and essays such as Reed’s ‘Public Works Practice’ may even offer precedents of how studio culture might change to better address the multidisciplinary, distributed, networked reality of so much contemporary landscape urbanist practice. But a rigorous contribution of pedagogical alternatives capable of engaging and instructing in the fluid, multifaceted and complex conditions of contemporary urbanism has yet to be seen.

Charles Waldheim states in his introduction to the book that Julia Czerniak’s essay points to the possibility that the landscape urbanist moment has passed. This would seem a relevant question to ask now 10 years on from its official birthday. Does landscape urbanism represent a set of practices that are significantly different enough from the big four to warrant its recognition as a distinct domain of knowledge? More importantly perhaps, does landscape urbanism wish, or need, to be recognised this way to function effectively? This recognition would mean moving past the endless identification of new sites of practice and theoretical speculations about how such sites might be designed, and actually *accomplishing* urbanism(s) which go beyond those banal and ubiquitous environments which are so prevalent in metropolitan areas around the world today. Ultimately, landscape urbanism has perhaps set itself up as a target for easy criticism because of the enormous scale and scope of the work it sets out to do. By combining the terms ‘landscape’ and ‘urbanism’ at this time – when global society has finally tipped to being more urban than it is rural, and when landscape is all-pervasive because of the increasingly accepted notion that we have seen the ‘death of Nature’ – we can seriously ask what part of the physical world does not fall under the conditions described by the terms landscape and urbanism? At a certain level critics argue that there is nothing new here, that landscape urbanism is simply a way for landscape architects or architects to break free from the limitations that have ossified in the public imagination, but is not this in itself a potentially worthy cause? Landscape architecture, architecture, urban design and planning are all burdened by a cumbersome history of traditional approaches, professional codes of conduct, representational strategies and aesthetic norms. Is there a way for landscape urbanism to avoid such baggage and remain a space in which one can step, if the conditions require, and think in

a manner not allowed when in the space of the ‘big four?’ In what looks to be an increasingly postdisciplinary future, turf wars will be even more boring and useless than they are now. Perhaps the power of landscape urbanism lies precisely in its near boundlessness, its resistance to easy categorisation or description, its willingness to nomadically sniff out opportunities where others see only waste or incomprehensible complexity – *towards a coyote urbanism?*

NOTES

- 1 Drucker, P (2003) *The New Realities*, New Brunswick: Transaction, p ix, [emphasis mine].
- 2 Easterling, K (2003) Error, In *Landscape Urbanism: A Manual for the Machinic Landscape*, M. Mostafavi and C. Najle (eds) London: Architectural Association, p 154.
- 3 See Mostafavi, M. and Najle, C. (eds) (2003) *Landscape Urbanism: A Manual for the Machinic Landscape*, London: Architectural Association. See also my review of this publication in *Landscape Journal* 24, no 2.
- 4 Wigley, M (2005) Towards the perforated school, *Volume*, no 1, pp 36–49.