THE EXPANDED FIELD OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE (1997)

ELIZABETH MEYER

I am particularly interested in defining and establishing a theory for the built landscape between the dominant binary categories of many texts on modern design. In particular, I realize that we must alter the marginal role landscape architecture has been assigned in the histories of modernity. As a field that built physical critiques of, and in, the American city that embodied broader society’s unquestioning acceptance of industrialization and technological progress, landscape architecture has not fit within the descriptive, evaluative, and interpretive categories of mainstream modernism—historical or theoretical. As such, its contributions to culture and society have either not been recognized or have been misinterpreted and maligned. Landscape architects are only now coming to terms with this deficit and its implications for designers and planners.

My research methods and interpretive strategies for theory-making as a feminist landscape architect can be characterized as follows:

1. Interpretations of built works and treatises should be based on primary experiences that are mediated through the knowledge of historical situations. This primary experience has two forms—visiting a site; and studying historical plans, maps, treatises, journals, letters, photographs, and the like.

For example, to understand the topographic form and hydrologic systems that structure the Emerald Necklace park system, a student of the Olmsted firm’s project must study more than the 1894 plan. That engraving depicts streets, water bodies, plantations of trees, and meadows, but no topography. The site appears flat. The shapes and locations of the various “beads” along the Necklace seem arbitrary—or informal and unstructured. After studying the landforms of the park system through grading plans of the period and contemporary U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) maps of Boston, one discerns repeated landforms, such as drumlins and eskers, that characterized this glaciated terrain. The alignment of the Necklace is not irregular; it maximizes the diversity of landscape types that characterize New England. The alignment of the Necklace and the undulations of the land within its boundaries speak of the structure of the land.

A walk along the seven-mile transect from Franklin Park, the country park, to the Public Garden and the Boston Common is an excellent way to assemble the information found in nineteenth-century maps, plans, and reports into a coherent spatial narrative. This walk, too, must be mediated by comparing historic photographs with contemporary appearances, because the growth and decline of vegetation, and the modification of adjacent roadways, have altered the connections between the “beads.”

2. We should be suspect of the generalizations that “transcend the boundaries of culture and region.” Instead, theoretical work should be contingent, particular, and situated. Grounding in the immediate, the particular, and the circumstantial—the attributes of situational criticism—is an essential characteristic of landscape architectural design and theory. Landscape theory must rely on the specific, not the general; and like situational and feminist criticism landscape architectural design and theory must be based on observation, on what is known through experience, on the immediate and sensory—what is known by
all the senses, not only the eye. Thus, landscape architectural theory is situational; it is explicitly historical, contingent, pragmatic, and ad hoc.² It is not about idealist or absolute universals. It finds meaning, form, and structure in the site as it is. The landscape does not sit silent awaiting the arrival of an architectural subject. The site—and land—speaks prior to the act of design.

Earlier I described Prospect Park as a landscape design that applied the abstract conceptual language of nineteenth-century aesthetic theory—the Beautiful or Pastoral, the Picturesque, and the Sublime—to the particular conditions of a tract of land in Brooklyn. The circumstances of the site—its location at the boundary between glaciated and nonglaciated landforms—suggested the most fitting place for each of the aesthetic characters to be developed.

Bos Park in Amsterdam provides another example of how built landscapes should be situated prior to, and through, theoretical interpretation. The location of Bos Park on a polder encourages us to look closely at the section of the park. Height above sea level is the critical dimension in the design; the section, not the plan, is key in describing the structure of the existing land and the design response to it.

3. We should be skeptical of discourses that assign a gender affiliation to the landscape—implicitly or explicitly. The implicit affiliations are manifest as "female"—the "other" who is seen but not heard. Hitchcock's writing on the modern garden, noted earlier, is an example of this. The ideal modern house is surrounded by sylvan nature that merely frames the building. Nature is the neutral backdrop. The explicit affiliations are manifest as "feminine"—that which is irrational, wild, chaotic, emotional, natural. The site descriptions of Duany and Plater-Zyberk are examples of this, as any landscape element that alters the town plan grid is considered awkward or distorting. There are not two structures on the site, only one—that of Euclidean geometry.

4. While the deconstruction of the discourses that relegate landscape to a silent female or irrational feminine role in modernism is necessary, it is not enough. We need to reconstruct the unheard languages of the modern landscape as a means to reinvigorate contemporary design practice. The work of a feminist design critic is reconstructive, not destructive. This reconstruction assumes a multilayered fabric that weaves together threads from primary sources and documents written by landscape architects and about landscape architecture with the concurrent history of ecological ideas, cultural and historical geography, design and planning criticism, and site interpretation.³

We must do more than note how badly served landscape architecture is by descriptions that rely solely on architectural categories and concepts. Scholars' research into the history of modern landscape architecture must question what has been lost when landscape design components are overlooked. As noted in the earlier interpretation of Radburn, by ignoring the project's planting plan and the contributions of Cautley, the social spaces of the neighborhood were misunderstood by historians and practitioners. The role of trees and hedges as spatial subdivisions between the public and private realms was ignored, and the result was that the many projects that supposedly emulated Radburn were characterized by amorphous open space. Contemporary residential life, as well as an accurate history, suffered from this incomplete reading.

5. Finally, landscape architectural history has been, for the most part, a masculine discourse focusing on the works of great landscape architects—mostly men. The history of modernity has especially concentrated on the autonomy of these artistic works, their formal attributes, and their plan configurations. This historiography must be enhanced and challenged, for it denies the conditions of practice, conceptualization, and experience. This chal-
lenge exposes landscape history as a fiction that has been written through a particular lens or sensibility that has ideological implications. By challenging the "formulation of the crucial questions of the discipline as a whole," I am following in the footsteps of scholars such as Griselda Pollock and Linda Nochlin, whose writings have enriched the histories of modern art. To paraphrase Pollock, a dual role for feminist landscape architectural history and theory—"recovery of women producers" and "deconstruction of the discourses and practices of [architectural] history itself"—is a positive act of construction, not destruction.

For landscape architectural history and theory, this translates into more than research on the many women designers whose careers were ignored by such scholars as landscape historian Norman Newton. Scholars must also reconsider the methodologies of prior histories to ascertain whether or not they precluded some works from entering into the canon. Scholars and students must determine whether a history comprised of monographs on individual designers and their works allows for the consideration of the complexity of collaborative work in a corporate practice. How does one chronicle the works of Sasaki Associates, the SWA Group, or EDAW, for instance—three firms whose employees move in and out of the practice over time? We must discuss whether landscape architecture's quest for status as a profession and discipline is par with that of architecture resulted in the repression of more horticulturally focused designs and designers. We should wonder about the lack of contextual site plans and urban plans in our histories, which limit our ability to interpret built landscapes as more than great works or objects. Shouldn't landscape architectural history and theory attempt to uncover the interrelationships between a project and its surroundings? If we believe it is important for students to know something about the history of architecture as well as landscape architecture, shouldn't they also know something about the emergence of ecological thinking, especially during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

One goal of scholarship, therefore, is to construct legitimate alternatives to the limiting binary terms that modern society has adopted to describe relationships between landscape and architecture, nature and culture, female and male, nature and man. In place of such oppositional binaries, we need conceptual quaternary fields such as those I have proposed for figure and field, man and nature. These expanded fields are defined by concepts—such as the figured ground, articulated space, the minimal garden, and landscapes for architecture—with complex, not simple, relationships to one another. The scholar can develop theories for site description and interpretation that occupy the space between nature and culture, landscape and architecture, man-made and natural, and that are along the spatial continuum that unites, not the solid line that divides, concepts in binary opposites.

This realm of inclusions will reposition the landscape from "other" to "ground." Andreas Huyssen's essay "Mapping the Postmodern" may offer direction here. He proposes that "in an important section of our culture there has been an important shift in sensibilities, practices and discourse formations which distinguishes a postmodern set of assumptions, experiences and propositions from that of the preceding period." He continues by arguing that postmodernism has not "generated genuinely new aesthetic forms," but rather has continued to employ modernity's forms "reinscribing[ing] them into an altered cultural context." Huyssen lists the environment and ecology—along with the culture of women, minorities, and non-Westerners—as the grounds upon which modernity's forms are reinscribed. Huyssen's procedure for reinscription connotes an image of intersections, overlaps, hybrids, and cyborgs that are created only by acknowledging that two terms of elements can relate to one another without implied hierarchies or dominances—without
Sculpture in the Expanded Field - Rosalind Krauss

**Figure 19.** An alternative version of an expanded field for landscape architecture, derived from Krauss’s “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (after Rosalind Krauss and Elizabeth Meyer).

"others." Instead of a static, visual landscape that is out there, irrational, irregular, and open, we have a spatial, temporal, and ecological site that is present before an artist or a designer begins to work. The designer, then, allows the site to speak more clearly through the design interventions he or she makes. The site and the designer are collaborators.