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On the Exhibition

“Transforming the American Garden” intended to question existing norms and give designers a freer range in which to create than what is provided in current professional practice. To remove the major constraints of climate and site from landscape design, however, produces serious consequences. Ideas that can exist on paper are necessarily different from those occupying real space. On paper one may possess limitless land, a perfect climate, no erosion, and a realm in which every plant grows to a perfectly clipped outline.

The removal of the projects from the world of real plants and dirt hardly grants by fiat artistic viability to the works involved. I would think that many of these paper designs are no more artistic, and perhaps a lot less meaningful and enjoyable, than the derided “crafted” garden mentioned in the introduction. There is, in fact, a rather perceptible narcissistic tone to much of the work, one of the exhibition’s most disturbing aspects. That tone has been common in architectural circles for over a decade but is new to landscape architecture; and I’m not quite sure that it represents a positive “transformation.”

As an educator, I am somewhat troubled by this as an approach to *design*. The

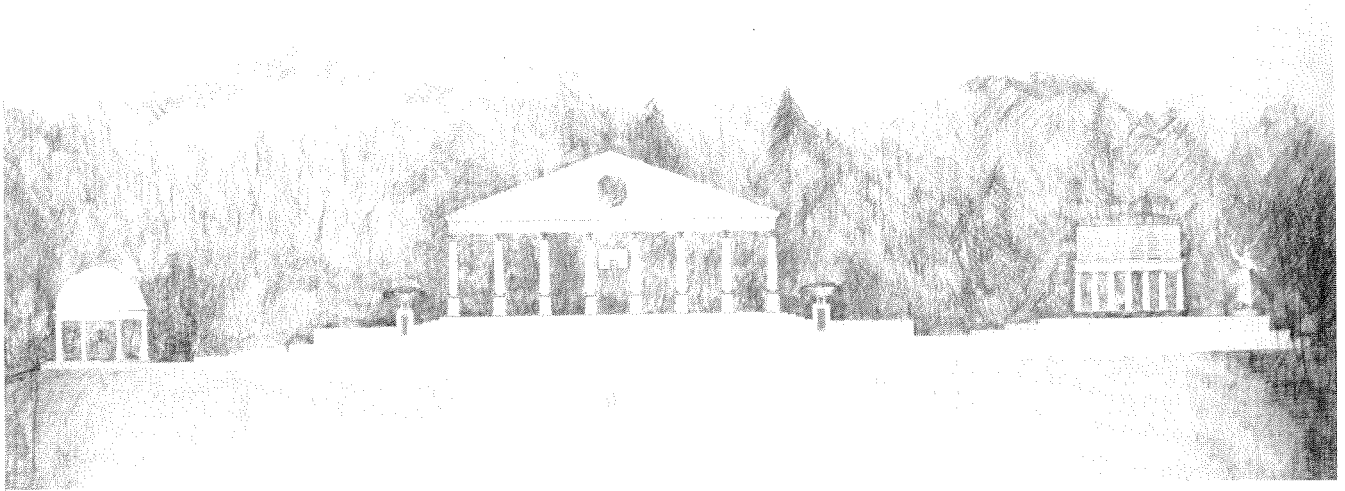
existence of external parameters is perhaps the greatest single factor distinguishing the instigation of art from that of design. In making art, the parameters usually rest with the individual, though they are constrained by such factors as the limits of the medium or the nature of one’s assistance. Design, on the other hand, is commonly conceived in response to conditions external to the designer. Only in commissioned art do the sets of these programmatic and technological parameters overlap.

Three orders of ideas concern us in design. The first, and to my mind the highest, is the expression of a philosophical position greater than the immediate project at hand. It may be religious, it may be didactic, but the idea must imbue the design with a significance beyond that of immediate sensory experience. The second order concerns the handling of the medium: in building, architectonic ideas such as the use of the grid, metric order, or numerical relationships. In landscapes, the design idea might be manifest in the skilled use of plant materials, water, or spatial composition. Lesser landscapes substitute this second order for the primary one; that is, the organization of content is confused with the content itself. The third level of ideas is the pragmatic or detailed, which must be taken to include not only the

accommodation of functional and physical needs but those psychological issues the design must address.

Of course, the categories are not rigid. For example, one can explore the possibilities of using the ideas behind the second order as a means of telling us about our world. In landscape architecture, this would appear to be a far more obvious approach than in architecture, since the former discipline deals more directly with living systems. Is there not some way that the design of the garden could tell us about nature and thus life? Could not the phenomenon of the garden—life in a microcosm—provide us with a detailed view into our quotidian existence?

Certain of the exhibition’s projects addressed design beyond the superficiality of the pretty graphic subject. Julie Moir Messervy and Peter Friederich Droege sought to create a place that reminded us of human frailty and our responsibility to acknowledge the everpresent threat of nuclear annihilation. Admittedly that is a large burden for a garden to carry, and unfortunately their design as drawn conveyed little of the power of their verbal statement, but their intention was substantive. Michael Van Valkenburgh’s “Eudoxia,” on the other hand, borrows its starting point from literature, which may be both a shaky notion and a slim thread on which to hang significance. The



formal skill with which the design is executed, on the other hand, is admirable, though one wonders about the exact shaping of the vegetation that more closely resembles inert rather than growing material.

Water, which informs the “Hydrotopia” project by Pamela Burton and Katherine Spitz, is an obvious element for investigation in the garden. The orchestration of the individual conditions in the design, however, is difficult to discern in the graphic materials that accompany the description. Terence Harkness’s “An East Central Illinois Garden” is refreshing in its humility and all but loses its identity in the cultivated fields that surround it. Perhaps this was his intention: to show us that all that grows is a garden, though this intention is not clear in the catalogue.

Of the twelve projects, my eye returned most often to Warren T. Byrd’s “Tidal Garden: Eastern Shore of Virginia.” Byrd, like many of the design teams, rooted his designs in a specific site, as if a paper site could support no life. And as the introduction notes, most of these sites were proximate and familiar

to the landscape architects involved, landscapes in which they had worked before. The tidal garden is made and unmade by gravity and the pulsing of the ocean. Its excessive formality at first is offputting, and it is easy to question the appropriateness of such a rigidly ordered scheme to convey the existence of natural phenomena. But the accompanying sketches and text suggest a lighter touch within the rigid geometric configuration. More engaging is the contrast of the sheet of water against the bank at high tide with the residual meanders of water in remission at the ebb. The effect tells us about our position in the world, the passing of time, and the effects of natural phenomena on our lives, all within a genteel and elegant—if strictly formal—garden setting.

Ultimately we must ask whether the exhibition really provides us with hopes or models for “The New American Landscape.” Probably not. For one, we see a return to more classical ordering, probably in direct reaction to the mannered informality of the ecological school of design and the skewed fragmentation that characterizes certain re-

cent schools of postmodern architecture. Several of the designs, including Byrd’s, contradict Jory Johnson’s claim that “Americans are not beholden to the almost oppressive traditions of Europe,” which tested against these schemes is patently false. Ironically, the project that somewhat facetiously deals with the pop cult of basketball uses a classical temple for its primary structure. What we learn is that many American landscape architects are continuing the European tradition as if incapable of formulating their own myths.

The content of many designs is disturbing for both their restricted use of greater ideas and lack of acknowledgment of our truly American cultural landscapes. In sixteenth-century Japan, the tea masters engaged in “re-seeing” (that is, reconsidering or reforming) the simple rural world, elevating vernacular elements to an art form. Tea houses derive from farm structures, millstones could be used as pavers, and fragile bamboo could be as prized as a rare ceramic. Could we not look around us—and the Illinois and Virginia gardens have begun this search—at those

Temple

Lee Weintraub and John Di Domenico

landscapes in which we dwell to find sources for forms that can educate us not to an abstract notion of pure beauty but to an understanding of the lives we live?

Representation

Since an exhibition of this type is presented in words, drawings, and models, the question of the limits of representation underlies its evaluation. Drawings represent space and form, but they also illustrate and occupy space. Some gardens offer striking visual images with only tepid ideas of lukewarm experience behind them; there is a vast difference between graphic pattern and experienced spatial configuration. Others play with color or view to suggest the experience on site. On the whole, the drawings are more convincing as landscape representations than the models. Perhaps this is due to the fact that drawings have remained the primary tool of landscape analysis, unlike in architecture, where the drawing and the model have shared a nearly equal validity.

Graphic representations perform two functions. The first conveys the structure or idea of the design; the second, suggests the experience of that idea realized. The structure is the design's organizational system or configuration and has been traditionally communicated in drawings

such as plans, elevations, or axonometric projections. None of these drawing types, however, gives us a picture of the world as the human views it.

Perspective provides a useful tool for experiential representations, though it is far from the way even the eye in isolation actually sees. Large scale models and mockups are also used for this purpose.

All representation should perform both functions to some degree. A plan of a labyrinth, for example, rates very high on structure but suggests none of the closure or claustrophobia experienced in place. A perspective or photo taken in a pathway of the labyrinth provides us with a notion of that experience but almost nothing of the configuration. There is no good and bad, but there should be an understanding of drawing use and limits.

Of the experiential representations, the series of Illinois landscape studies provides us with the most complete insight to the variety of takes seen from a distance. Chip Sullivan's idealized garden, while curiously Persian for Florida, arranges sets of view fragments, like words in a jumbled sentence, to direct our reading of the information. His quasi-cartoon style, appropriate to his intentions as written, operate in the zone of experiential depiction, although there

is a distancing and an abstraction that prevents us from seeing them as actual places. In comparison, the soft perspective sketches of the Virginia tidal garden are more usual in their formality and selection of viewpoints.

In many instances the designer's verbal statements are far more intriguing than the designs or their graphics. This may be due to the limitations in reproduction techniques as well as representation. But words, particularly adjectives, are loaded (see the menus at the International House of Pancakes and their free use of hyperbolic adjectives) and conjure up emotional or intellectual reactions with which to bias or replace the ideas conveyed in the drawings. Much of our appreciation or criticism of Michael Van Valkenburgh's design, for example, derives from a testing of the Calvino text against the design, comparing the verbal to rendered mode. It formalizes the common sequence of trying to fit form to words, whether those of the designer or those of the program.

On Flowers

Why is this exhibition receiving so much attention: a large segment of this journal, a lavish catalogue, and a tour to numerous cities? The principal reason is that this is the first exhibition in quite some time to suggest that landscape architecture can be an

artistic and intellectual as well as a professional enterprise. As such, "Transforming the American Garden" is a period piece, and it probably would never have produced the stir it has were it not for the movements that immediately preceded it. The exhibition questions the restriction of landscape practice to craft; design that lacks an intellectual or poetic base; landscape design free of ideas; perpetuation of the status quo. What it offers in their place, however, is ultimately troublesome and troubling.

For some reason the flower was selected as the starting point for the designs, perhaps for its purity of subject. The authors of the program brief claim that the "fields and forests of flowering plants were the landscape until man transformed it." Considering the basic grandeur of the topography, the scale of the mountains, the sweep of the plains, and the size of the rivers, this statement seems far wide of the mark. Giant scale has been the most distinctive characteristic of American landscape, and in comparison the flower plays a minor role. Scale, on the other hand, is the property most difficult to create on a small plot of land and is even more difficult to draw.

Choosing the flower as the point of departure for the new American landscape at first seems like an improper tactic, but few of the

exhibitors actually examined the subject to any depth. One used the flower as a source of color, like a magic marker, while another used it principally as a background graphic device. I would be hard put to find a single garden in the lot that truly developed from the idea of a flower, its color, growth, or physical properties beyond the chromatic. In this sense these are hardly new flower landscapes.

If the poetic trope of synecdoche—the use of the part to stand for the whole—had been employed, the content might have been deeper. If one examined the flower as a microcosm or a universe, the projects might have borne greater significance to our daily lives. If the flower had been seen less as a means to paint or make patterns and more as a means to present audible, olfactory and visual properties of garden, the projects might have produced a greater impact on the way we see the landscape or how we might fashion it in accordance with our aspirations. That growth, cycles, and time, so endemic in the garden, played a major role in so few of the designs is puzzling.

This past Christmas, I received what I considered to be an unusual gift: an amaryllis bulb. Knowing nothing of this sort of thing, I had to solicit guidance on its care and feeding. First nothing; but after some

weeks a leaf shot out, then another, and then several. The stalk followed, climbed, and reached what seemed a rather awkward proportion when capped by its bulging bud. The bud became a bloom, and after some six weeks a glorious four-part, red-tinted flower unfurled. I had seen it in my kitchen, watched its growth day by day, and ultimately learned more about the flower—and possibly the garden—than I did from reading the catalogue and examining the designs it contained.

Removing the real site and plants from the arena of the designer is no guarantee that the landscape will become more aesthetically conceived. Instead of withdrawal from the world of reality, we need to delve into its origins. Watching the amaryllis unfold, I sensed, in a Japanese way, the phenomena of growth and life and was saddened that the plant diminished its own resources as it grew—a metaphor for the world, perhaps. If the intention of this exhibition had been to focus on the garden as a microcosm from which we might learn about the greater landscape, it would have been better founded; for from the basic unit we *can* learn to achieve a greater understanding of the whole.