

---

# A Discourse on Theory II: Three Tyrannies of Contemporary Theory and the Alternative of Hermeneutics

James Corner

---

James Corner is an Assistant Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Fine Arts. He holds a B.A. degree with honors from Manchester Polytechnic, England, and an M.L.A. degree and an Urban Design diploma from the University of Pennsylvania. His interests focus on landscape design theory and criticism.

**Abstract:** *This essay is about the crisis of creativity and meaning in contemporary Western culture and how the use of modern landscape and architectural theory works to perpetuate an excessively "hard" or neutral world—a world in which culture can no longer figure or recollect itself. A brief critique of three predominant approaches toward contemporary theory is presented: positivism, the use of paradigms, and the Avant-Garde. In different ways, each approach derives from modern techno-scientific thinking and invariably seeks closure, certainty, and control. The built landscapes that result often suffer from an equally closed explicitude: a stifling immance where all is exposed and nothing is left to imagination. The essay suggests an alternative strategy grounded in the tradition of hermeneutics. Here, theory is something ever-open, permitting a free association of ideas through the mechanics of situational interpretation and metaphor. Hermeneutics provides the basis for a landscape architectural theory that transcends pictorial image and historical style by critically engaging contemporary circumstance and tradition. The landscape itself is a hermeneutic medium and becomes the ground for such an endeavor, enabling the remembrance, renewal, and transformation of a cultural tradition. The author argues that a hermeneutic approach to the theory and practice of landscape architecture is a way of returning to our designed landscapes the powers of the everyday and the revelatory—the grounds of memory and hope.*

---

*Those who have always avoided the labor of the concept say they are tired of debates about theories, that one should get down to the thing itself, to the texts. This kind of talk is the symptom of a scientific crisis marked by the disjunction of . . . theory and the practice of interpretation.*

—Peter Burger,  
Theory of the Avant-Garde

*For, if without prophecy there is no hope, then without memory there can be no communication.*

—Colin Rowe, Collage City

The social and cultural dimensions of our postmodern condition have been explored by many over the past two decades, but the primary characteristic of the Postmodern can be traced back through the whole modern era to the enlightenment shift during the 18th century (Habermas 1983; Lyotard 1984; Huyssen 1986).<sup>1</sup> Since that radical break with tradition, our culture has been caught in a period of transition, roaming without center in a time between times. "Too late for the gods and too early for Being" (Heidegger 1977a, p. 37), a dis-

located culture works toward a new time of consciousness, "learning anew to be human" (Steiner 1990, p. 2). The difficulty of our search, however, is that faith has been superseded by reason in a world now plagued by disillusionment—a world governed primarily by the logic of modern technology and global economics. Heidegger (1977a) refers to the resulting human condition as a "loss of nearness" or a loss of intimacy between humans and their environment as well as between people and their communities. Clearly much of our built environment today reflects this estrangement and is perpetuated by most contemporary attitudes toward theory and practice in landscape architecture and the related arts (Figure 1). This essay explores this condition by looking at the role of theory in landscape architecture and its ability to address the existential problems of our times.<sup>2</sup>

The objectifying logic of technology has emerged as a dominant force in our world during the past two hundred years. It has enabled societies to control the external world in the

interests of efficiency and production, while at the same time it has displaced the movement of tradition (because of its progressivist position) and suppressed the poetics of art (because of its ideology of objectivity and optimization), thereby devaluing an already impoverished life-world (at least spiritually). Many humanists have consequently attributed much of society's ills to the alienating effects of technology and capitalism, arguing for the need to transcend the reductionism of technoeconomic thinking prior to the realization of a more humane built environment (Husserl 1970; Heidegger 1977a, 1977b; Perez-Gomez 1983). Indeed it could be argued that the primary problem of survival for the developed cultures of today is less a techno-biological one than it is an aesthetic and moral one (Lyotard 1984).

Landscape architecture has not remained untainted by these developments. As a discipline, it has become increasingly estranged from a sense of traditional and poetic value. In particular, this refers to what might be

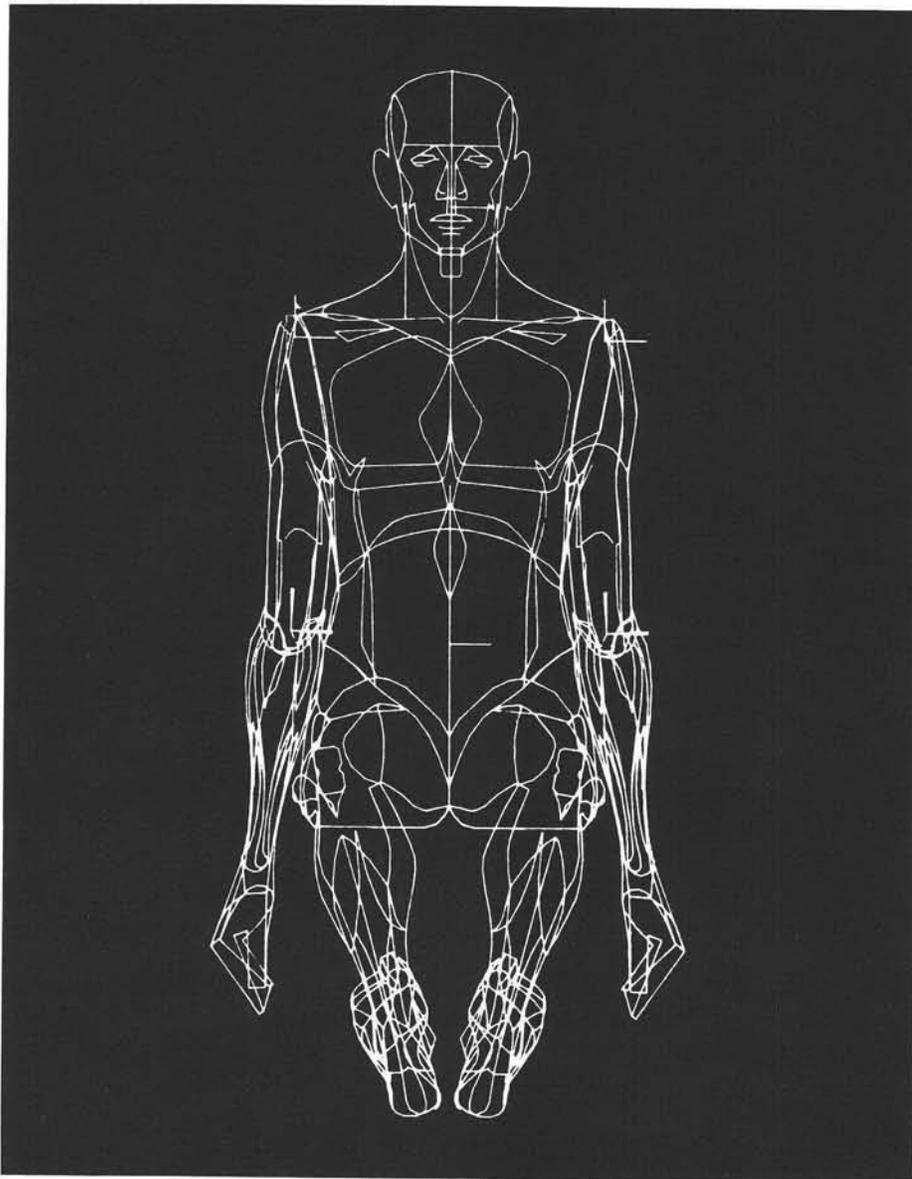


Figure 1. "Computer Man," drawn by a computer. Taken from *Design Quarterly*, No.66/67, 1966. Source: Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

perceived as the current inability of landscape architecture to simultaneously engage the recurrent and thematic workings of history with the circumstances peculiar to our own time. Traditionally, cultural products (as found historically in literature, painting, music, building, or landscape architecture) represent an infinitely rich array of interpretative gestures and figurative embodiments that have attempted in various ways to critically reconcile the historical with the contemporary, the eternal with the moment, the universal with the specific. Today, however, we find it increasingly

difficult to manage this relationship. Many fail to even appreciate the role that landscape architecture plays in the constitution and embodiment of culture, forgetful of the designed landscape's symbolic and revelatory powers, especially with regard to collective memory, cultural orientation, and continuity. It is not unfair to say that contemporary theory and practice have all but lost their metaphysical and mythopoetic dimensions, promoting a landscape architecture of primarily prosaic and technical construction.<sup>3</sup> After all, symbolic and poetic inten-

tions are often rendered naive in a scientific world, where pragmatic values of efficiency and optimization are often considered more "real" (Perez-Gomez 1983).

Theory today is therefore quite different from *theoria*, the original Greek formulation of theory.<sup>4</sup> Whereas *theoria* was mediative and reflective and was derived from the primary realm of human experience and perception, modern theory has largely become an instrument of certainty and control, founded upon autonomous principles of external origin. The predominance of instrumental techniques and rational methods in an anthropocentric world is what has most characterized modern thinking. While the scientific attitude has led to a multitude of accomplishments in modern science, it has also underlain the emergence of a disembodied culture struggling to find access to a lived continuity of being and time. Ours is a landscape of estrangement.

How might landscape architectural theory rebuild an "existential ground," a topography of critical continuity, of memory and invention, orientation and direction? Through our works in the landscape how might we mediate a cultural dwelling in transition? To find answers, we must first explore and challenge three predominant approaches toward contemporary theory, each of which has a tendency to degenerate into a tyranny of control and closure.

The first approach is *positivism*: a dogmatic, empirical approach that believes a logical synthesis will follow from a comprehensive and objective fact-structure. The second is the use of *paradigms*: a belief that problems may be solved by looking to universal models for solutions and methods. The third is the *Avant-Garde*: a movement of intentional subversion, where the quest for originality spurs on an endless series of experimental reactions. In different ways, each approach derives from modern techno-scientific thinking, perpetuating an excessively "hard" world in which culture simply cannot figure or recollect itself.<sup>5</sup>

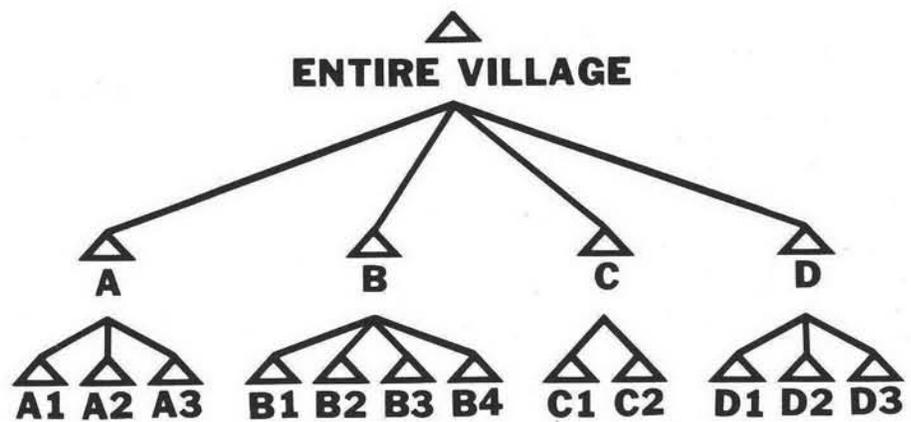
#### *Three Tyrannies of Contemporary Theory*

*Positivism.* Positivism involves the explicit description and explanation of the factual phenomena with which it deals. Positive statements are asser-

tions about reality as tested by scientific method, and that can withstand detailed and objective scrutiny. One part of positivism is *substantive theory*, or the science of the concrete. This aspect is concerned with identifying, explaining, and understanding the tangible phenomena with which it works. The purpose is to provide an objective and analytical knowledge base prior to any action. Another part of positivism is *procedural theory*, which is concerned with the scientific description and explanation of design processes. Combined, both parts constitute a *methodological theory* that strives to describe the world and account for actions taken in it (Lang 1987). The primacy of logical and objective reasoning in modern positivism has consequently led to the illusion of humankind's infinite capacity to explain, control, and put to work the forces of nature.

One of the positions taken by positivism in landscape architecture and planning is that no action may be taken, or any change initiated, until all the factual data have been collected. Teams of experts are assembled to work together in gathering the most complete and accurate data-set. This inductive procedure continues with the returns finally mapped, quantified, and tabulated. Rates of growth are then projected, predominant futures defined, and likely developments plotted. This is certainly true of modern "systems theory" and a variety of other methodological processes, especially in planning. One has only to plow through the complex matrices of Christopher Alexander's *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* (1964) or to look at the exhaustive collection of data involved in McHarg's suitability analyses to see the laborious nature of such an enterprise. Resembling pieces of electronic circuitry, formless diagrams and maps and charts are produced to show the rationale of the process, accounting for and legitimizing the logical outcome (Figure 2).

Herein lies the tyranny, for it is assumed that factual data alone will automatically lead to a logical and credible synthesis (Rowe 1982). The data themselves are privileged as the source and destiny of the project and are often represented through such a "packaged" techno-iconography that one wonders if an automaton might be



A1 contains requirements 7, 53, 57, 59, 60, 72, 125, 126, 128.

A2 contains requirements 31, 34, 36, 52, 54, 80, 94, 106, 136.

A3 contains requirements 37, 38, 50, 55, 77, 91, 103.

B1 contains requirements 39, 40, 41, 44, 51, 118, 127, 131, 138.

B2 contains requirements 30, 35, 46, 47, 61, 97, 98.

Figure 2. The structure of a design problem and the treelike hierarchy of logical problem solving. Source: Christopher Alexander (1964), *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*. Reproduced by permission (Harvard University Press).

programmed to produce them. The final product never seems to be quite so significant as the process.

The failing of extreme positivist approaches to design is that they validate their theory in the realm of the objective and effectively suppress or exclude any sort of imaginative vision or speculative free will. Subsequently the positivist's quest for an empirically accountable resolution predicates the future as a "natural" extrapolation of the present status quo. Colin Rowe (1982) has written:

Not at all preoccupied with invention, their practical object is to disclose the immanent, to assist a particular condition (presumed to be latent) to "discover" itself; and, anxious to avoid the least possible imposition, their practice could be said to derive from a never too precisely formulated theory—that of maximum non-intervention. (Let us do nothing to inhibit the creative unrolling of time) (p. 12).

The irony in such dogma is the failure to recognize or address the value-impregnated quality of all observation. As W. H. Auden has pointed out: "The problem with the behaviorists is that they always manage to exclude themselves from their theories.

If all our acts are conditioned behavior, surely our theories are too."<sup>6</sup> The experiment and the appropriate fact gathering are produced under the assumption that the essence of factual reality—nature—is mathematical. Instrumental thinking can take into account only those facts that are susceptible to current mathematical and scientific understanding, to the exclusion of those other aspects of the world that provide us with the greater part of sensuous experience. What "facts" are selected and used are those that support the hypothesis. As a consequence, "contemporary thought is now endangered by the picture drawn by science," wrote Werner Heisenberg (1958). "This danger lies in the fact that the picture is now regarded as an exhaustive account of nature itself, so that science forgets that in its study of nature it is merely studying its own picture."

Further, facts, even if they could be found to be irrefutable and bias-free, are inevitably overtaken by time—a consequence that will often undermine the "all-accommodating" plan, rendering its original basis null and void (Rowe 1982). Consider the case of the Isle of Dogs, at the London Docklands, planned as an "Economic Enterprise Zone" during the early 1980s. Michael Wilford's (1984) pen-

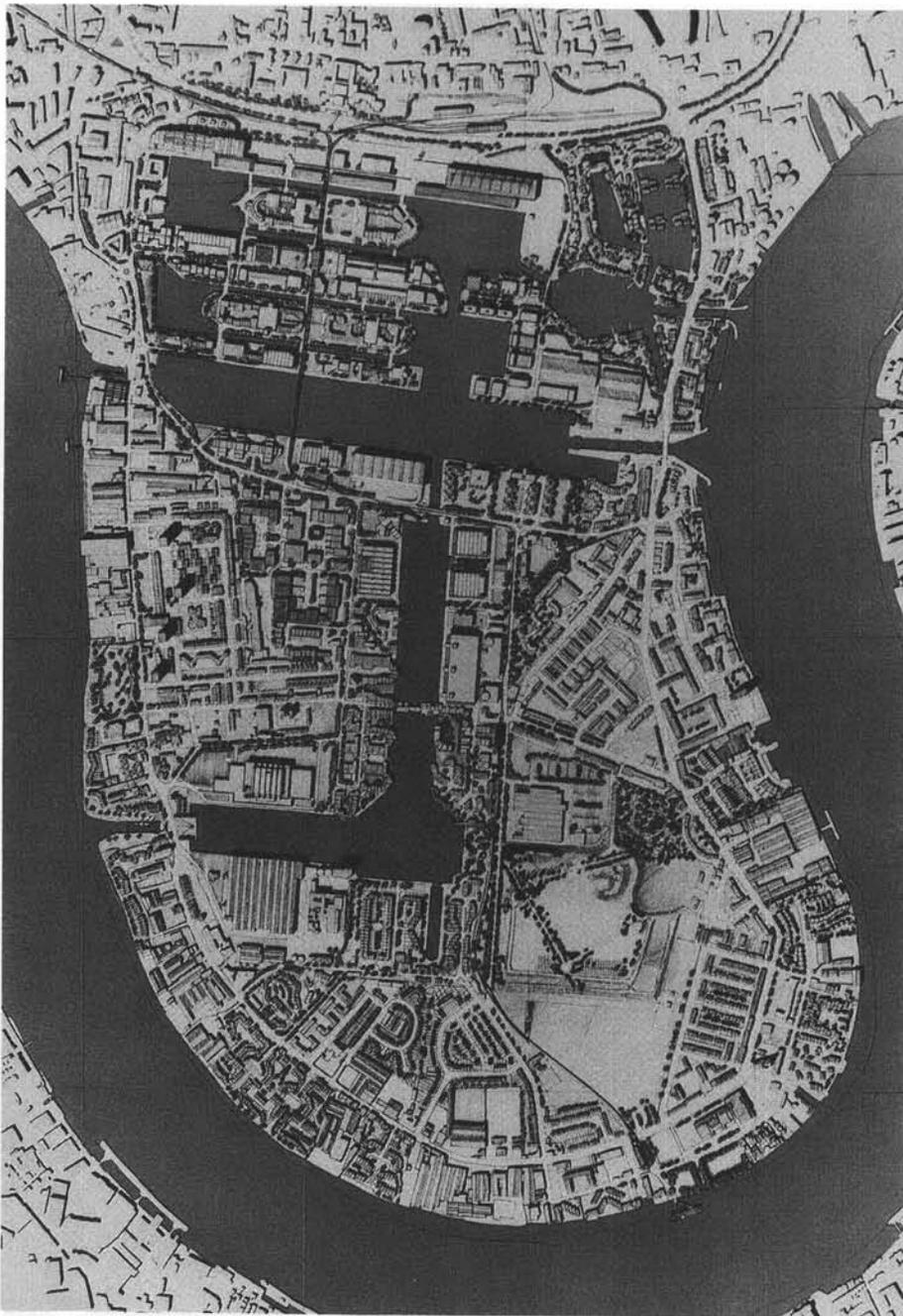


Figure 3. Isle of Dogs, London Docklands. Concept Plan (1982). This weak and simplistic plan, devoid of a strong public-private hierarchy and spatial structure, was the result of an overly cautious attitude based in positivist-economic reasoning and ad-hocism. Source: *Isle of Dogs: A Guide to Design and Development*. Courtesy of the London Docklands Development Corporation.

etrating critique of a planning process gone awry elucidates the failings of a “rational” design methodology supported by reams of analytical data and augmented only by populist vignettes in seductive marketing brochures.

While the resulting plan at the Isle of Dogs was infinitely flexible and

accommodating—as was demanded by the Thatcherite regime—it lacked strong formal and physical characteristics. An example of the “new pragmatism” in urban design, this “weak” form of flexibility was subsequently abused by the private and economic interests of those who bought

into it, effectively destroying any possibility for a cohesive and stimulating public realm. The result is an urban landscape of “free for all” developer projects that relate very little, if at all, to one another (Figure 3). In terms of scale and experiential coherence, the Isle of Dogs appears ad hoc and lacks any clear spatial vision or *idea*. Wilford (1984) describes the plan as “simplistic. It does not express either an exemplary image, or mood of confidence or credibility. It is a highly innocent diagram . . . based on caution, modesty, and the least possible imposition” (p. 15).

Other built landscapes that result from the positivist attitude seem equally impoverished and uninspiring. They are usually mathematically efficient and economically profitable, while the poetics of place have been blindly erased. Built and planted over in universal fashion, the hygienic image is empty and inoffensive. Think of the sterility of Milton Keynes, much of the London Docklands, or many American shopping malls and suburban developments. Cleansed of memory and consciousness, these deserts of quantitative reasoning form a striplike cortege of anaesthetized landscapes (however much-loved they may be by mass-culture).

To extrapolate a future from an illusory, albeit quantitative, fact-structure is highly dubious. If metaphysics, poetry, myth, and interpretive imagination are excluded from any synopsis of the real, then any outcome must be considered incomplete, if not completely erroneous. The existential world cannot be reduced to mathematical formulae imposed by techno-economic logic. This cybernetic attitude is anathema to anybody who knows the world to be as wonderfully enigmatic as it is, charged with mystery and infinite value. Yet how difficult it is for many of us today to imagine there being anything more to the world, or to a landscape, than its value as a resource—either practical, economic, or aesthetic.<sup>7</sup>

*Paradigms.* Another approach toward theory is that of the paradigm. A paradigm represents a lens through which a group of practitioners share a view of history and nature so as to be able to proceed in a stable, coherent manner. Thomas Kuhn (1970, p. viii)

defines paradigms as “universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners.” Practice interprets the world and works within it using its paradigm. A paradigm is therefore a means by which a community can determine a sense of common identity, establish some form of socialization, and practice in a consistent and productive way. By following the rules and precepts of a particular paradigm and working methodically with its models, one can move toward an assured solution.

When a paradigm is working successfully, its practitioners enjoy the coherence it provides. A “good” paradigm will be both credible and therefore stable, but also unfinished or incomplete, thereby prompting refinement—a kind of “mopping-up” operation (Kuhn 1970, p. 24). Through such focused and specialized research, paradigms are further developed.

A paradigm works for a community because it sorts out fundamentals, providing a shared basis for focused and detailed work. It provides the models and methods by which complex problems may be comprehended and solved. However, a paradigm will only continue to work for as long as it can account for a particular situation. When anomalies do occur, paradigms become subject to modification and, ultimately, replacement by a new paradigm. Kuhn (1970) traces such “paradigm shifts” in astronomy and physics, beginning with Aristotle and Ptolemy, through the Copernican revolution in the 13th century, on to Kepler, Newton, Lavoisier, and Einstein. Landscape architecture also has a chronology of paradigmatic phases and subsequent shifts, such as the break from Classicism to Romanticism in England during the beginning of the 18th century; or the break from a 19th and 20th century anthropocentric dominance of nature to a form of ecological integration between human systems and the environment during recent years.

A new paradigm will carry with it attendant principles, methodologies, and models. In landscape architecture these are represented by new treatises, manifestos, journals, and executed

works. To solve a problem, one must first turn to the principles underlying precedent solutions. As a landscape architect confronted with a particular site and program, one might use a paradigmatic “model-solution.” The task then would be to adapt, or transform, the model to fit the peculiarities of the specific problem. Over a long period of time this process of application, adaptation, and transformation can refine and enrich the paradigm, making it fuller.

Here a distinction needs to be made, because the term *paradigm* can legitimately be understood in two entirely different ways. First, it can stand for an *ideology*: a complete constellation of beliefs, values, and general laws as shared by a particular community—a way of looking at the world. Second, it can refer to *exemplary models*, particular forms, or “types,” which represent the ideology *applied* (Kuhn 1970, pp. 176–191).<sup>8</sup> Further elaboration of this distinction follows.

*Paradigms as ideologies.* Ideological paradigms establish theoretical frameworks within a particular philosophy. In this sense, formalism, historicism, ecologism, or poststructuralism are paradigmatic. Positivism and the avant-garde are also ideological paradigms; that is, they are belief systems with laws and values necessary for coherent practice. We cannot escape this form of paradigm, nor should we want to if it is appropriate and working well.

However, while such paradigms are inevitable, they are always only partial, unable to account for every aspect of reality. A paradigm represents only one way of looking at things and often constructs such a compelling world that it becomes almost impossible to see the worlds of others. While there may be several “schools of thought,” each developing its own paradigm, there is little chance of dialogue between them because each has its own specific languages, codes, and norms. At their worst, ideological paradigms can produce such blinkered research and practice as to become rigid and insular, inevitably closing in on themselves and degenerating into dogma. Consider the previous case of positivism for example; or the deterioration of Modernism and subsequent emergence of Postmodernism in reaction to that.

*Paradigms as models.* The second sense of the term *paradigm* is more problematic and has been the one most used by architects and landscape architects over the years.<sup>9</sup> This is the notion of paradigm as a very specific “type,” or an exemplary formal model that represents an ideology applied. For example, Jefferson’s University of Virginia (1822) may be considered as an applied model of Classical principles, appropriated from a specific work and applied to campus planning (Figure 4). Alternatively, from the world of deconstruction, one might look to the Wexner Visual Arts Center, Ohio State University (1988), by Peter Eisenman and Laurie Olin, as an applied example of de-centering and scaling. In turn, these works themselves become paradigmatic models of spatial and social ideologies, available now for replication or transformation.

The early treatises of Alberti and Palladio were written using paradigmatic models. Landscape treatises by Andre Mollet, Dezalier d’Argenville, Humphry Repton, and Andrew Jackson Downing also provided models that embodied the applied principles of a coherent landscape architecture. Presented like advice, a series of axioms, rules, and techniques were described in order for a “successful” landscape to be built.

For example, in Downing’s *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, published in 1841, the purpose of the book was stated at the beginning. People who wished to embellish their grounds needed only to consult the book for “some leading principles, with the knowledge of which they would find it comparatively easy to produce delightful and satisfactory results” (p. vi). Following Repton’s lead, Downing devoted a major part of the book to making a distinction between the “Beautiful” and the “Picturesque.” The Beautiful was described as being “graceful . . . flowing . . . curvaceous . . . verdant . . . and placid,” while the Picturesque was described as “striking . . . irregular . . . rough . . . and tumultuous.” The images of Claude Lorraine were used as models of the Beautiful, while those of Salvador Rosa represented the Picturesque. One of Downing’s “rules” was that the two

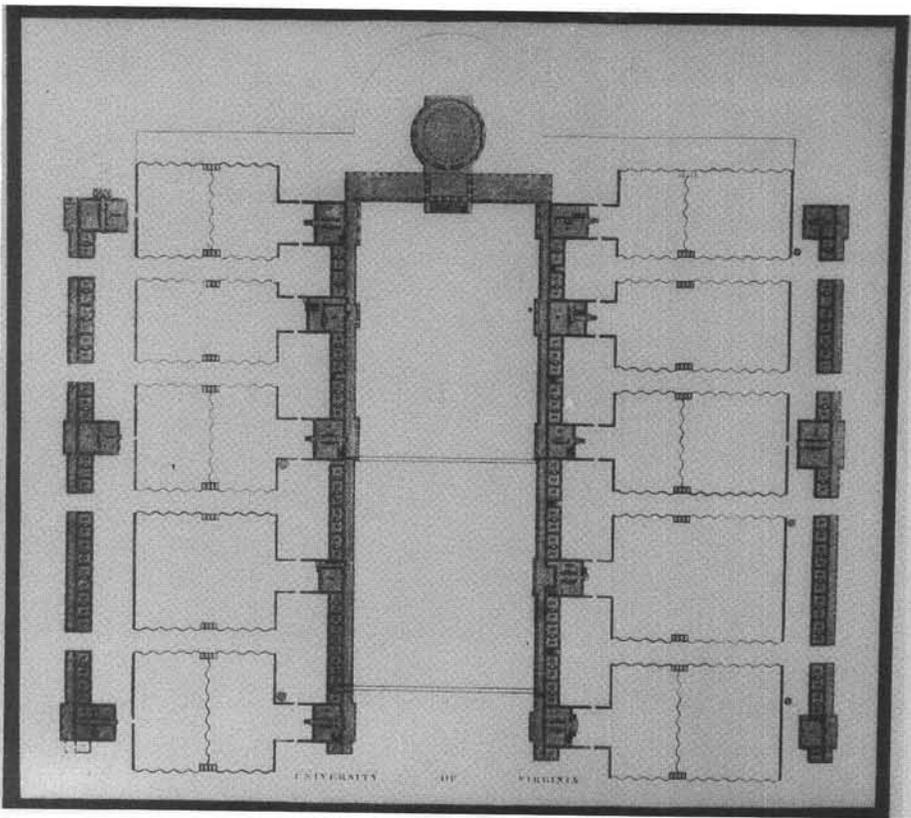


Figure 4. Jefferson's plan of the University of Virginia. Drawing by John Neilson and engraving by Peter Maverick, 1822. Trustees of the University of Virginia.

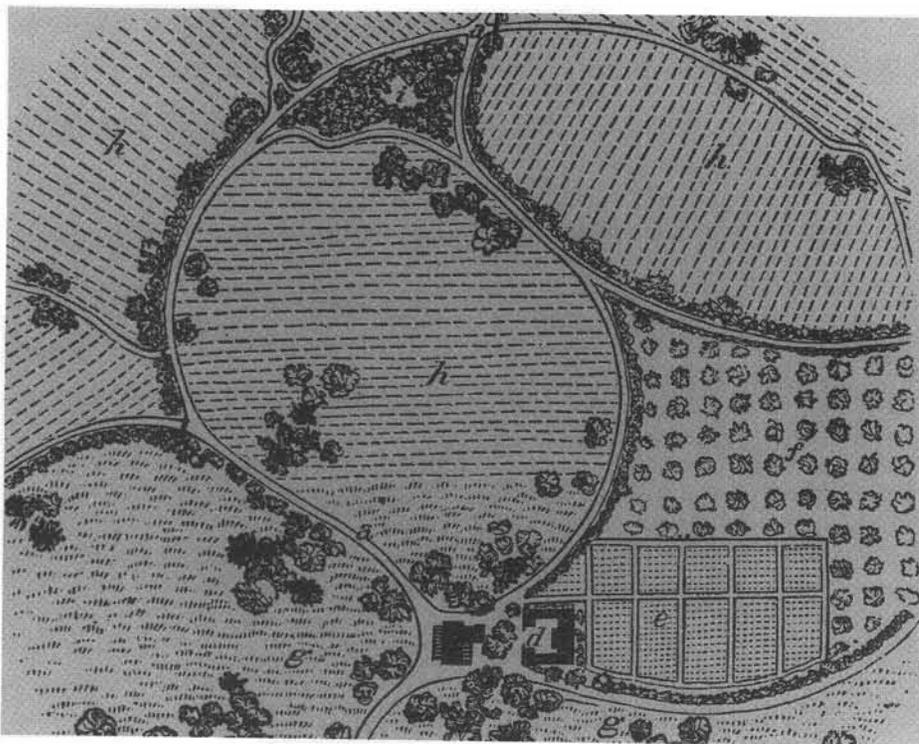


Figure 5. A prototype plan for a picturesque farm (*ferme ornée*) by Andrew Jackson Downing in his book *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1841).

styles should not be mixed, proclaiming that one should “always endeavor to heighten, or to make that single expression pre-dominate; it should, clearly, either aim at the Beautiful or at the Picturesque” (p. 30). Sketches, planting plans, massing diagrams, and layout plans were used as models to illustrate the application of either style (Figure 5).

Herein lies part of the problem with paradigmatic thinking in the arts. That is, by the time Downing wrote his *Treatise* the original ideological and intellectual fervor that initially produced the English Landscape School had degenerated. The philosophy had become illusory; only the *image* persisted. When the ideological content of the original model dissolves, the empty form becomes nothing more than an icon for past cultures and their ideals. This is the danger of paradigmatic models, or “types”: they persist long after the philosophical basis has been forgotten. Form lingers, replacing content.

This accounts for part of our difficulty today, where much of practice looks primarily at the formal image of certain models without understanding, or finding relevant, the origin or tradition of their being. This consumption of signs merely perpetuates the excesses of aestheticism and historicism, exemplary models being reduced to “stencils” for easy reproduction as fashion and taste desire.

Two contemporary advocates of the typological approach in architectural and urban design are Leon Krier (1984) and Rob Krier (1988).<sup>10</sup> For the Kriers, exemplary type is a de facto form, something invariable and not open to radical transformation. They understand architectural form to be external to historical evolution, with eternal and immutable laws. The Kriers’ taxonomy of “types” and “design rules” is based on confined interpretations of Classical models and the writings of the town planner Camille Sitte (1965).

While there is much good sense and aesthetic quality in the Kriers’ work (*Seaside* comes to mind), one must be wary of an underlying nostalgia that effectively nullifies the movement of creative time and cultural change, (Figure 6). The workings of art stand still

when an absolutist historicism is substituted for genuine history. To extrapolate a future from models of a pre-enlightenment past is to ignore all that has happened in between. How can we possibly say that Picasso, DeKooning, or Duchamp have had no effect on us, not to mention the specific contributions to landscape architecture by Olmsted, Eckbo, McHarg, Halprin, Burle-Marx, Smithson, or Turrell? And what of our investigations into the galaxies, or at the opposite scale into the very structure of genes, challenging our conceptions of space and time? Our paradigms of nature and landscape continually change. To work outside this shifting continuum is a naive prescription, counteractive to the movement of historical time and negligent of what it means to be "modern." To recall Eliade (1959, p. 95): "Living in conformity with the archetypes amounted to respecting the 'law,' . . . through the repetition of paradigmatic gestures, archaic man succeeded in annulling time."<sup>11</sup>

Not all typologists are as absolutist as the Kriers, however. Alan Colquhoun (1981, 1989) has explained how there have been two predominant views of history, one absolutist and the other relativist. The relativist view understands history as a series of closed epochs, each with identifiable beginnings and ends relative to culture and time.<sup>12</sup> An outcome of the creation of historicism and historiography during the Enlightenment, it is the way most landscape architectural history classes are presented—as a *chronology* of styles, forms, and types peculiar to a particular period. Typology for the relativist does not consist of "eternal" forms, but of forms and ideas belonging to stylistic "periods."

Rowe (1978) and Colquhoun (1989) both argue that the relativist view has produced two primary positions: one looking back, as in historicism, the other looking forward, as in "futurism." In the former, history runs the risk of being reduced to what can be seen. Formal styles become signs for the "higher" ideals of previous cultures and can be appropriated in any combination. As we have seen in the Post-modernism of the previous two decades, this neoconservative view has tended to impoverish and trivialize an

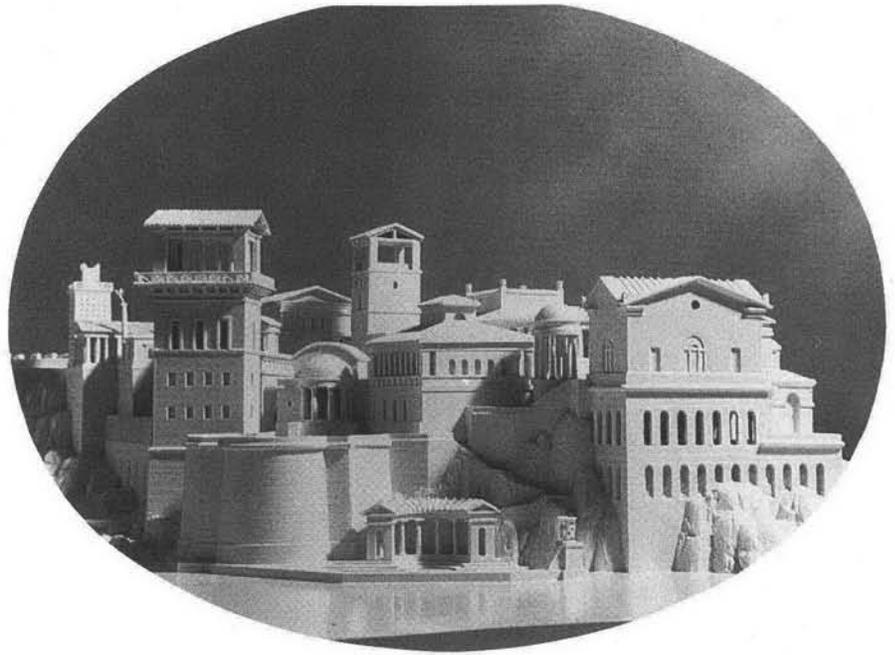


Figure 6. A model of Pliny's Villa Laurentum by Leon Krier. While compelling and remarkably beautiful is it appropriate to build like this in modern day America? Source: *Houses, Palaces, Cities: Architectural Design 54*, (1984).

authentic sense of tradition. The problem here is stated poignantly by Goethe, who wrote in 1794:

All dilettantes are plagiarizers. They sap the life out of and destroy all that is original and beautiful in language and thought by repeating it, imitating it, and filling up their own void with it. Thus, more and more, language becomes filled with pillaged phrases and forms that no longer say anything; one can read entire books that have a beautiful style and contain nothing at all.<sup>13</sup>

If the product of the positivists is a program devoid of form, then that of the rational typologists is a form devoid of program (Rowe 1982).

In the progressivist view, by contrast, history runs the risk of being turned away from altogether. Instead of looking to paradigms of the past, the futurist looks to a radical invention of both social program and formal relationships. That is, by turning away from tradition and history, looking instead to a utopian future, the progressivists believe that they are actually being true to the relativity of their own time. This is in fact the basis of Modernism and underlies the tendencies of the avant-garde.

*The Avant-Garde.* From Vitruvius to Quatremere de Quincy, from Repton and Downing to Christopher Alexander and Ian McHarg, theory has primarily been the elaboration of rules and procedures for production. The avant-garde, however, can be characterized as a movement to resist the stability afforded by such precepts, actively avoiding any affiliation to tradition and convention. Its proponents believe that their work must be constantly made afresh, and they find creative adrenaline in risk, novelty, and polemical experiment. The rejection of rules and limits is an intentional attempt to create rupture, announced in the dictum: "Make it new!" (Figure 7).

Our present time can be understood as the result of successive avant-garde movements—an outcome of the relativizing of history. Tired of historicist eclecticism and wanting instead to celebrate the advances of modernization, the early avant-gardists looked boldly into the future and, in so doing, believed they were being faithful to the *spirit* of history: Art could best fulfill its historical destiny by turning away from tradition and express instead the peculiarities of its own time. To be modern

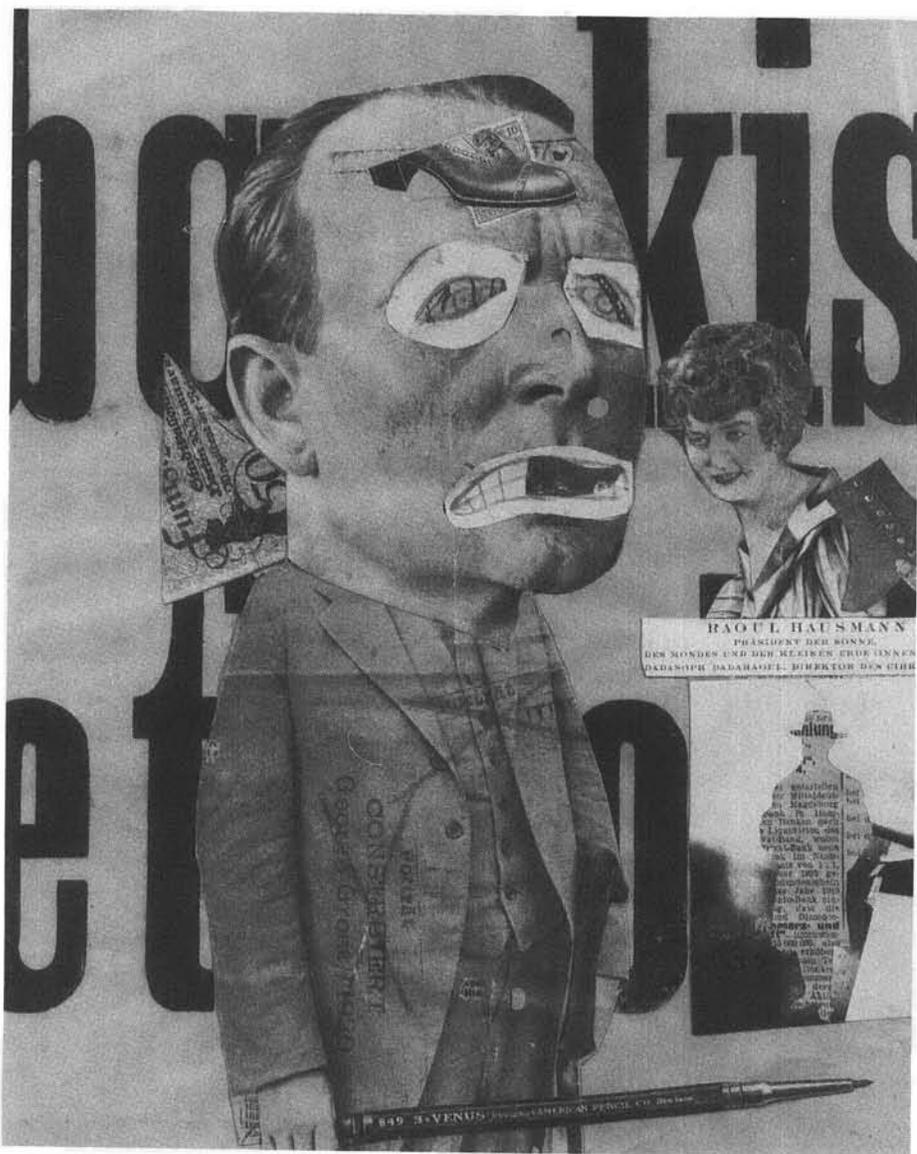


Figure 7. Raoul Hausmann, "The Art Critic," 1919–1920. Source: Tate Gallery, London. Copyright ART Resource, New York. Reproduced with Permission.

meant to be new, and to be new meant that one had to be original.

In the arts this view rejected the traditional bases of art, especially the traditions of *mimesis*—the notion that an artwork refer to an idea outside itself, as in mimetic representation.<sup>14</sup> Instead, Konrad Fiedler and others talked of the "opacity" of a work of art, where art need only refer to its own making (Colquhoun 1989; Junod 1976). As societal modernization stormed ahead, the early avant-garde sought refuge in this new-found autonomy. Thereafter followed Futurism, Purism, Constructivism, and a host of

other movements. Polemical manifestos (usually to the political left) announced the end of classical notions of beauty and harmony and rejected the traditional idea that nature be the supreme metaphor for all art. The work of Malevich, Tatlin, Lissitsky, and Chernikov displayed the formal and nonrepresentational nature of these early experiments, completely unforeseen in any of the preceding art movements. In addition, the non-figurative works of Mondrian and Kandinsky explored how the pure qualities of color and shape alone might be seen to have their own integ-

rity and meaning. Braque and Picasso developed the languages of Cubism and collage, privileging everyday materials. Duchamp went even further, reacting to the new formalism by proposing a completely "anti-retinal" art, an art where the pleasure was to be found in the "playfulness" of purely mental concepts. For the early avant-garde therefore, the media of expression itself and the techniques of production became the aesthetic object, leading the critic Clement Greenberg (1965) to define such a movement as "autonomous," "self-referential," and "self-generating."

In the early 1920s a few gardens that appeared in France sought to give expression in landscape architecture to the new ideas expressed in modern art. The landscape architect Andre Vera criticized historical approaches to garden design—especially those of LeNotre—as early as 1912, and his writing clearly influenced the architects Robert Mallet-Stevens and Gabriel Guevrekian.<sup>15</sup> Guevrekian's *Jardin d'eau et de Lumiere*, built at the *Paris Exposition des Arts Decoratifs* in 1925, was a striking triangular composition of stepped pools and terraces. Some were tilted and planted with colored flowers and grasses ranging from light pink to crimson. In the center was a sphere of stained glass and mirror, which would periodically flash brilliant light across the surfaces of the garden. His garden at Hyeres was equally radical (Figure 8). Here, a chessboard of terraces, some planted in vibrant colors, others finished in concrete and mosaic, were tiered and rose toward the apex of a walled triangle. Saw-toothed beds of plants zigzagged up each of the walls. Both gardens were unprecedented at the time, reflecting Guevrekian's spirited exploration of cubist composition and simultaneity and the use of new materials.

Fletcher Steele wrote enthusiastically about Guevrekian and other French landscape architects in an essay entitled "New Pioneering in Garden Design," published in *Landscape Architecture* (1930). Thereafter, landscape architects such as Eckbo, Church, and Burle-Marx ambitiously explored new ways of using materials, plants, and color in the forming of geometrical space. This modernist "tradition" continues today in the extraordinary work

of Martha Schwartz, the early work of George Hargreaves, or many of the new French-school landscape architects such as Michel Desvigne, and shows how in fact the avant-garde has now become normalized and encoded within its own tradition. Greenberg (1965) described this inevitable stabilization, explaining how the “function” of avant-gardist work is in fact to become paradigmatic within the traditional “laws” of a particular discipline. “The essence of Modernism,” he wrote, “lies in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline itself, not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence” (p. 194). The notion that a reactionary act of rupture can provide a “fresh-break” that later settles into a more paradigmatic disciplinary structure is still the primary value of avant-garde research.

For example, Bernard Tschumi’s (1979, 1990) early theoretical work, before the Parc de la Villette, clearly transgressed the norms of architecture (and landscape architecture) by importing all sorts of ideas normally considered to be out of bounds. The synthesis of architecture with such diverse territories as the montage techniques in cinematography, the manifesto writing of the futurists, the texts of James Joyce, the underworld eroticism of Georges Bataille, the psychoanalyticism of Jacques Lacan, the semiology of Roland Barthes, or the philosophy of Foucault and Derrida was achieved for Tschumi (after at least ten years of theoretical development) in the winning competition entry for the Parc de la Villette in Paris (1982). The interesting thing here is that the park was thought by many to be “avant-garde,” meaning that it was fresh and original, and yet, despite what is *said* about it, it actually *looks* like early 20th century Constructivism. Indeed the work of the early 20th century formed much of Tschumi’s preoccupation and research for more than ten years. One could say the same of Martha Schwartz’s work: it is not really that new or original, but represents a continuation of the avant-garde, and perhaps even a nostalgia for the same. Although Tschumi and Schwartz may have stepped outside the traditional limits of their professions, they are still treading familiar ground to anyone acquainted with the efferves-

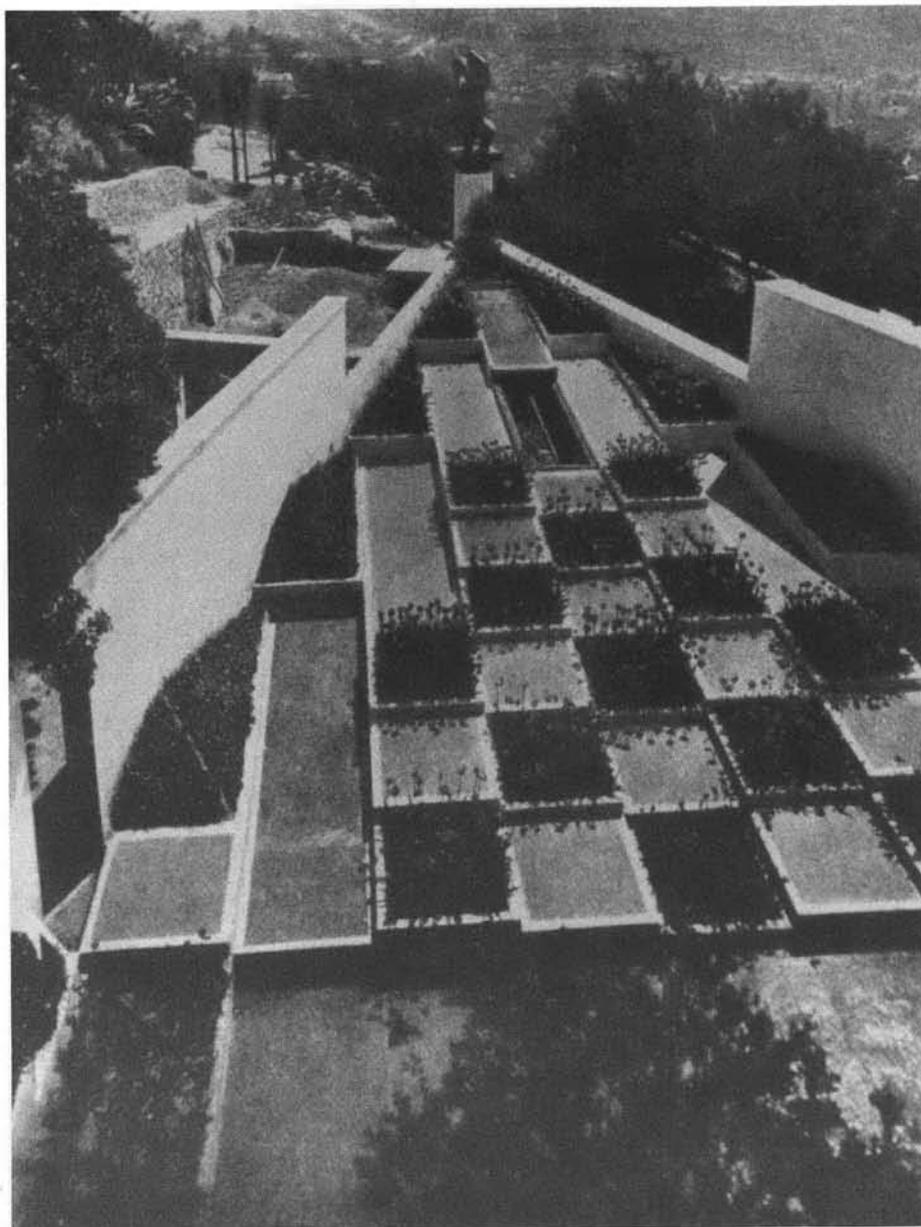


Figure 8. Garden at the Villa of the Vicomte de Noailles, Hyeres, France. Gabriel Guevrekian (1926). Source: P. Marrast. 1926. *Jardins*. Paris: Editions d’Art Charles Moreau.

cent age of the early 20th century (Figures 9 and 10).

An evolutionary avant-garde is clearly something different from an avant-garde of endless rupture. There is a distinction between the strategies of transgression and those of subversion. Transgression aims to construct theory from both within and outside the limits of one’s discipline. It involves a creative resetting of limits and may, indirectly, lead to the institution of a new paradigm. “Transgression opens the door into what lies beyond the limits usually

observed, but it maintains those limits just the same,” wrote George Bataille (1987). “Transgression is complementary to the profane world, exceeding its limits but not destroying it.”

To venture to the limits is to uncover the loose ends, the misfits. These are perhaps the anomalies of a paradigm that the blinkered specialist fails to see. To step into such a catalytic region requires a gutsy forward-probing; it is an unpredictable searching that is not without danger or risk. “An artist might advance specifically to get

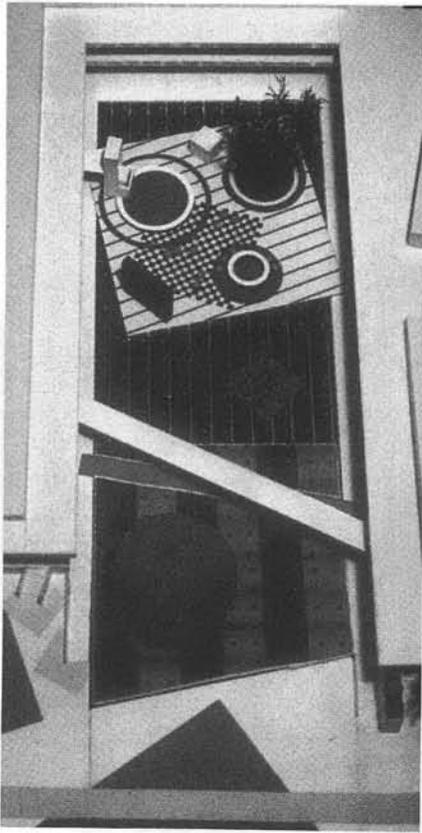


Figure 9. Rio Shopping Center, Atlanta, Georgia. Plan. Photograph by David Walker. Courtesy of Martha Schwartz (1989).

lost, and to intoxicate himself with dizzying syntaxes; seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge," wrote Robert Smithson (1979, p. 67), but he warns that "this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures."

In this sense the work of the avant-garde can be provocative, if not productive. The danger lies in what Peter Burger (1984) has referred to as the "neo-avant-garde," or the subversive:

The neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art*, and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions. . . . It is the status of their products, not the consciousness artists have of their activity, that defines the social effects of works. Neo-avant-gardiste art is autonomous art in the full sense of the term which means that it negates the avant-gardiste intention of returning art to the praxis of life (p. 58).

Burger goes on to describe how this cynical disregard of convention and everyday virtues "merely represents the deep-solitude of an individual's will to make a statement" and remains outside the norms and codes of a larger social group. This subversive attitude is most prevalent when the avant-garde enters its most radical phase. Here, the avant-gardists construct a particularly acute attack on whatever it is they are against, while failing to present any positive alternative or remedial vision. This nihilistic attitude is apparent in much of the writing of Nietzsche and Derrida, as in their progeny, the deconstructivists.

Without hope of truth or transcendence, the deconstructivists launch a massive assault on the bases of meaning and stability in the world, seeking instead to maintain the irreconcilable contradiction of our times.<sup>16</sup> As Francois Lyotard (1984) has proclaimed:

We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole. . . . Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the same (p. 82).

The language here is vehemently resistant to completion, stability, and holism (utopia). A new syntax, based around the prefixes de-, dis-, and trans-, forms the core of the deconstructivist's vocabulary. Consider the language used by Eisenman and Tschumi: "decentering . . . deconstruction . . . dislocation . . . dissociation . . . transference . . . fragmentation . . . fracturing" and so on. As in psychoanalysis, the fragments of meaning by which the world may be understood are assembled in displaced and purposefully unresolved combinations. Through techniques such as collage, montage, scaling, superposition, and grafting, the sheer heterogeneity of our postmodern times is multiplied in an "intertextual field." Such a field, without limits, knows of no single center, no single logic, and no single order. As with nature, it is irreducible (Figure 11).

While one might be curious, if not completely seduced, by some of the creative strategies used in deconstruction, some disquieting questions remain: What of the future and the

lived continuity of culture? The deconstructivists would probably answer that to structure such a vision is impossibly singular and utopian in what is now a heterogenous and ever-changing world. However, their counter-reason strategies only work to embody the chaos of our time—something that is ironically traditional by virtue of the recourse to representation. Just because one might "deconstruct" a landscape in order to see it afresh does not necessarily mean that it has to *appear* fragmented and disorienting.

The replicant automatons in the film *Bladerunner* similarly failed to see the limits of their own being. Unable to "figure" themselves, they wandered aimlessly, searching in vain for origin and meaning (Bruno 1987). The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1988) captures the emptiness of such disorientation in the phrase, "I exist, . . . I have no name, I have no meaning, I have nothing to say" (p. 30).

*The Tyrannies.* The three attitudes discussed above represent the bulk of our approaches toward theory and practice in contemporary landscape architecture, even though it is fair to say that landscape architecture has generally been conservative in both its usage and contribution to such developments. This may have left the discipline with a certain innocence, insulated from the errors of excessive intellectualization, but it has also led to an uncritical and unsophisticated dogmatism. In our search for a theory and language specific to landscape architecture, we must first realize how the predominance of methodological problem solving, systems theory, ecologism, typologies, historicism, formalism, behavioralism, and so forth are all variants of the three attitudes outlined above.

While each approach is complex and not without some value for landscape architecture, these theories generally operate *outside* the full complexity of the existential realm and tend to reduce and close as humankind continues to demand absolute certainty and control. The modern emphasis on objective and pragmatic reasoning has promoted a view of life that is more about the efficiency of means and ends, methods and techniques over questions of existence and being—the question "why" displaced by "what" and "how."

### Tradition and Hermeneutics

On what grounds may we discover an alternative, especially one pertaining to landscape architecture? The answer can be found in the articulation of a *critical* (that is, nondogmatic) and *interpretive* attitude toward history, culture, tradition, nature, and art, the basis of which lies in three working assumptions.

1. First, the world is not all-knowable, as modern technology might have us believe. Luminous and opaque, the life-world does not fit neatly into any one viewpoint. In an indeterminate, poetic world resistant to full capture, the disclosure of one aspect necessarily conceals another. In any understanding there is simultaneously light and shadow, giving and withdrawing. This means that all previous understanding is not in itself wrong, untrue, or without value, even though it may have long been discarded. Nietzsche (1984) has written:

That which we now call the world is the result of a number of errors and fantasies, which came about gradually in the overall development of organic beings, fusing with one another, and now handed down to us as a collected treasure: for the *value* of our humanity rests upon it (p. 24).

Nietzsche's aphorism concludes that the history of the cultural world is nothing more than pure idea, a *projection* recorded in the products of culture (language, music, artifacts, gardens).<sup>17</sup> If humans could look beneath the historical process to witness pure nature, they might be amused by how the world *seemed* to be so much, indeed everything, "but that in fact it is empty, that is, empty of meaning" (Nietzsche 1984, p. 25). Meaning is thus "sedimented" by culture through art and language; it is not already "given."

By extension, therefore, "truths" are only relative concepts, subject to shift and change. "The world for us has become infinite," wrote Nietzsche (1984), "meaning that we cannot refuse it the possibility to lend itself to an infinity of interpretations." Hence, the world known in one way is always interpretable in another.

Interpretation is therefore different from the way productive theories operate. For example, interpretation is always in response to a particular situation, replete with specific sets of

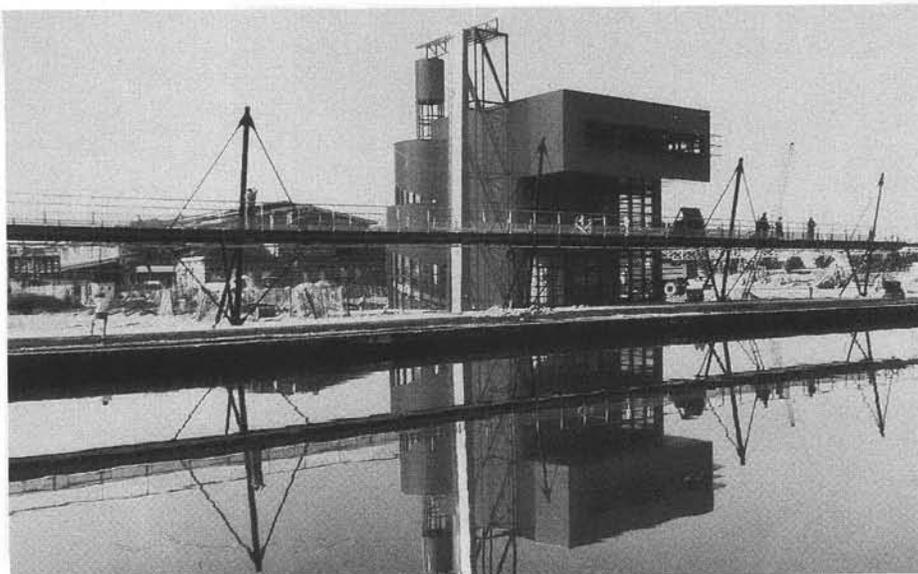


Figure 10. View across Parc de la Villette. Architect, Bernard Tschumi. Photograph by Anthony Walmsley.

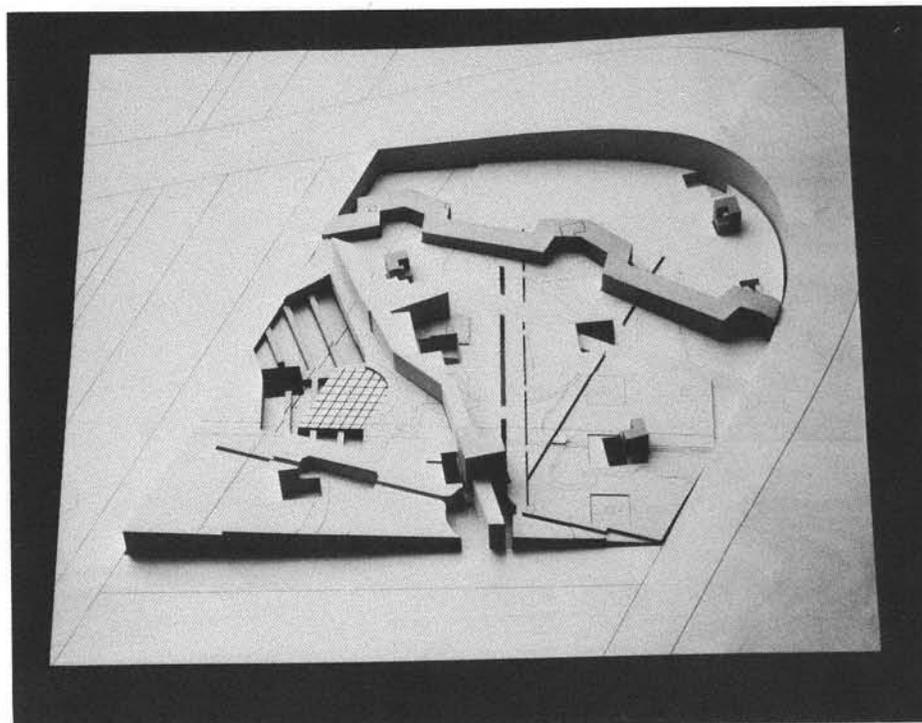


Figure 11. Model of "Choral Works," a garden at Parc de la Villette. The design was the result of a collaboration between philosopher Jacques Derrida and architect Peter Eisenman. Several "texts" are scaled, overlaid, and displaced, favoring an irreducible multiplicity of readings. Courtesy of Peter Eisenman.

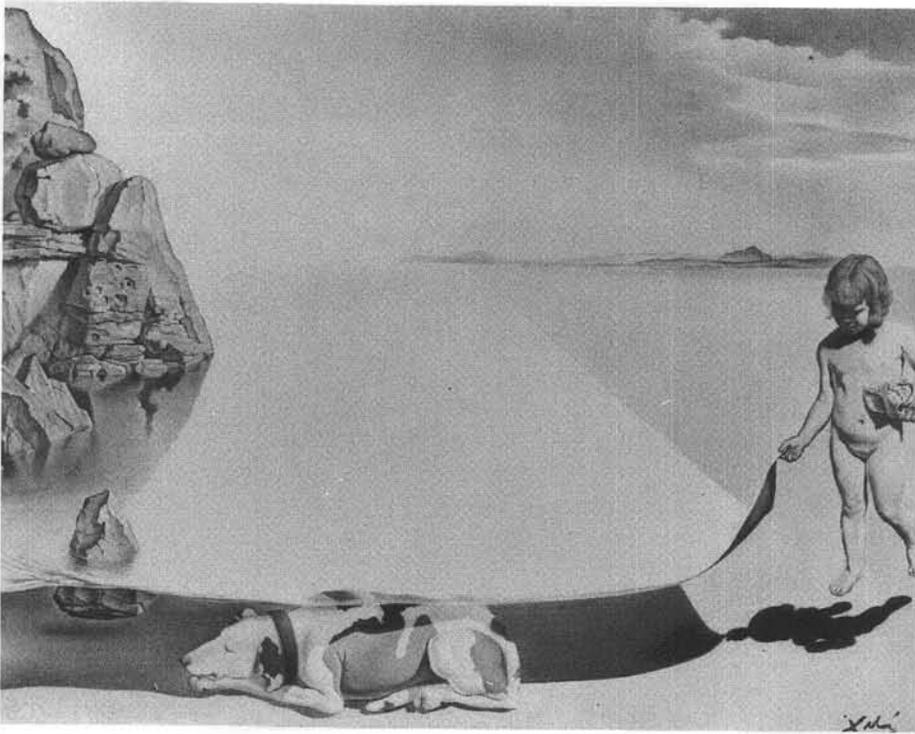


Figure 12. Salvador Dali. "Dali at the Age of Six, When he Thought he was a Girl, Lifting the Skin of the Water to see a Dog Sleeping in the Shade of the Sea," (1950). The painting depicts the role of imagination in disclosing hidden aspects of our world. Comte Francois de Vallombreuse Collection, Paris. Copyright 1990 Demart Pro-Arte/ARS, New York. Reproduced with permission.

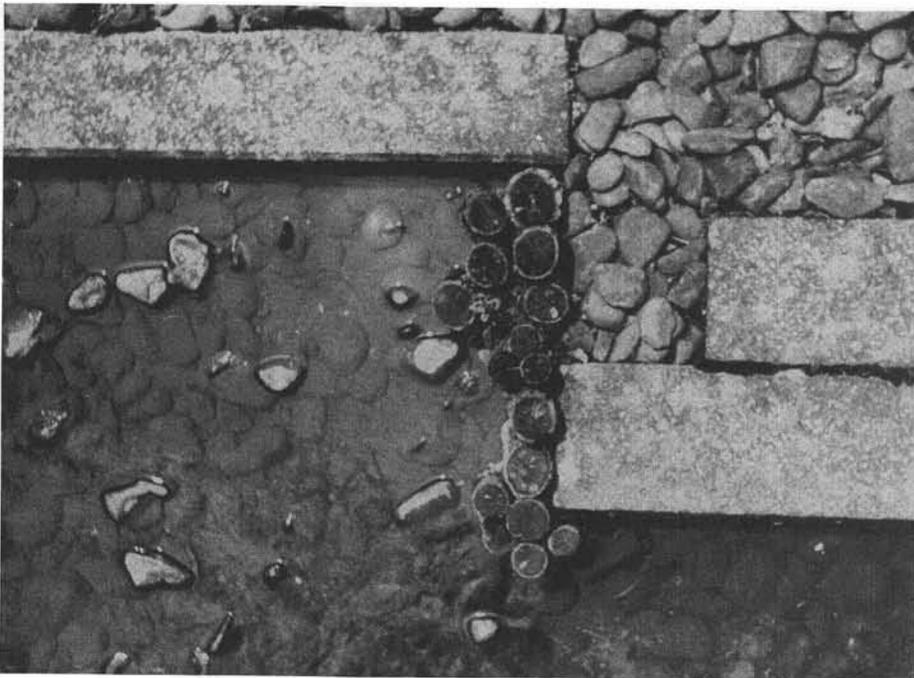


Figure 13. Japanese water edge detail, Kyoto Goshō. The photograph depicts a poetic and tactile use of various materials; the innate qualities of which can only be properly understood through sensual and bodily appropriation. Source: Norman Carver. 1955. *Form and Space of Japanese Architecture*. Tokyo, Japan: Shokokusha Publishing. Photograph by Norman Carver. Reproduced with permission.

circumstances (Irwin 1985; Leatherbarrow 1988). While much of today's theory is derived from a scientific approach—which tends to produce an ideal from a hypothetical or artificial arrangement—interpretation is always situated within particular contexts and must respond flexibly to the specific circumstances within which the interpreter operates. In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) states that "what makes modern scholarship scientific is precisely the fact that it objectifies tradition and methodically eliminates the influence of the interpreter and his time on understanding" (p. 333). The very idea of a situation means that we do not stand outside it, but rather that we inhabit it. We "dwell" in situations (Veseley 1988).

Moreover, because interpretation is situated and circumstantial, it never presumes to be anything more than interpretative and partial. Interpretation recognizes its own incompleteness, working with smaller units of inquiry as opposed to grand utopian models or holistic schemata. Gadamer (1981) has written that interpretation is "only an attempt, plausible and fruitful, but never completely definitive. Interpretation is always on the way." Unable to presume certainty, a situational and interpretative approach to theory and practice defers singular understanding and remains ever open to the world (Figure 12).

2. The second working assumption is that primary knowledge is that which comes from direct experience. We live in a corporeal and phenomenal world, amongst real things, in specific places, and it is only through the perception of this primary realm—rocks, rivers, solar cycles, seasonal change, human encounters, and so on—that different cultures have understood and found access to the ideal.<sup>18</sup> Humans make perception out of things perceived (Merleau-Ponty 1962).

Traditionally the arts have sought to unveil and make explicit the ideal (the invisible) through an interpretation of this phenomenal world. In this way the most inspired landscape architecture has provided humankind with a sense of meaningful belonging and orientation while transcending earthly limitations—think of the very concept of "garden" or "place," for example. Through physical embodiment, cul-

ture has been able to perceive the enigma of existence and nature, otherwise confused in the mutable reality of everyday life.

The medium of ideation—and subsequent embodiment—in landscape architecture is the landscape itself. This not only encompasses the physical materials and natural processes that constitute landscape, but also includes the codes and languages through which landscape is culturally understood. The landscape is therefore the *setting* of our lives, the sensual-intellectual perception of which constitutes meaning and value. By extension, things and places can be properly understood only through nearness and intimacy, through bodily participation (Figure 13). A theory and practice that simultaneously emerges from and engages in this realm of perception is therefore qualitatively different from the application of a priori conceptual orders, which are analogous to mathematical logic or rational planning and always *precede* action. It is only through the actual undertaking of perception-based work—imaginary drawings, models, artifacts, and the actual building of landscapes—that the landscape architect can best find access to the enigmatic richness of landscape space and time. Only through the temporal and phenomenal processes of doing and making can revelation occur. Indeed, the quest becomes a dangerous *personal* task involving self-discovery and self-possession—a personal task because the primary source of creativity is grounded in the tactile experience of making, of *techné-poiesis*, crucial for any significant ideation.<sup>19</sup> Thus one works toward a landscape of embodied thought—a built “topos” of mind.

3. The third working assumption is that “tradition” does not refer to some vague recollection of the past, frozen and inaccessible, but refers instead to the creative and processual power of which we are an integral part. Gadamer (1975) describes tradition as a “happening,” a continual unfolding of human endeavor, which might best be understood as humankind’s equivalent to nature. Both are eventful phenomena, equally resistant to objectification and rational dissection and too fluid for the confines of formalization or repetition.

Tradition is therefore a dynamic

artifact, a result of human work and the accumulation of ideas. In constituting culture, tradition is continually being worked toward. Any intervention today, whether of personal or historical accident, can inevitably become a formative ingredient in later movements.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the previously discussed “tyrannies” are obviously part of this inheritance. Our rationality, as with our modes of abstraction, is part of our modern condition and will inevitably form the basis for any future work. To simply reject or work outside such a context would be both naive and irresponsible, running the risk of an impossible nostalgia on the one hand or a perverse isolationism on the other.

With the phenomenon of tradition so defined, it becomes possible to imagine an approach toward theory that critically engages the archaeology of previous accomplishments while also projecting into the future. Hence, a responsible and critical theory might be one that would seek to reconcile previous cosmologies with those of our own time, attempting to find new joints of meaning between our ancestry and our future.

By extension, this task relates to what Paul Ricoeur (1961) has defined as a central problem in contemporary culture; that is, “how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization” (pp. 276–277). The call for a relinking of modern culture to its vital heritages demands a remapping of our history and tradition, in which landscape architecture has a significant part to play. The objective is to devise new meanings (futures) from a critical and yet imaginative reinterpretation of our tradition (past), thereby transcending the superficiality of pictorial image and historical style. For example, Picasso’s painting was in fact a critical interpretation of the history of Western art and, at certain moments, of primitive art.

The engaging of tradition is therefore a reconciliatory practice, equally able to distance itself from the enlightenment myth of progress (positivism and the modernist avant-garde) on the one side, and from regressive conservative impulses

(historicism) on the other. Kenneth Frampton (1983) has defined such a position as a “critical *arriere-garde*”—a removal from both the “optimization of advanced technology and the ever-present tendency to regress into nostalgic historicism, or the glibly decorative” (p. 20).

*Hermeneutics.* These three working assumptions—situational interpretation, the primacy of perception, and the “happening” of tradition—form the basis of hermeneutics: a theory of understanding and interpretation.<sup>21</sup> Named after the god Hermes, known to be the mediator between gods and mortals, hermeneutics developed as a means of practical translation, first of difficult religious texts and later of complex ethical and legal issues. As a transposition of Aristotelian practical and political philosophy, hermeneutics was practiced in order to serve the *polis*, or the common good, reconciling universal “laws” with the particular circumstances at hand. Like *theoria*, it reflected the social significance of its work and was related to an existential function.

Today, hermeneutic’s field of application is comprised of all those situations in which we encounter meanings that are not immediately understandable but require interpretive effort.<sup>22</sup> It attempts to integrate bodies of knowledge through finding “places” of commonality and agreement. Furthermore, because hermeneutics is an intuitive-practical form of reasoning, it gives strength and validity to those bodies of knowledge—the experiences of art, landscape, poetry, and philosophy, for example—that cannot be verified by the methodological standards of science.

Thus hermeneutics differs from the approaches to theory described earlier in that it is primarily a contemplative and mediative practice, as opposed to an analytical and calculative “system” (positivism). It is also ontological and circumstantial rather than methodological and universal (paradigms). And it continually unfolds within a *process* of tradition, as opposed to the discontinuity of endless provocation and novelty (the avant-garde).

Hermeneutics is able to perform its difficult mandate primarily through the use of rhetoric and metaphor. Both



Figure 14. "Great Triangle" Nazca, Peru. The landscape is itself a text that is open to interpretation. Photograph by Marilyn Bridges. Copyright Marilyn Bridges, 1979. Reproduced with permission.

are essentially bonding mechanisms whereby meanings once considered disparate or antithetical can be joined to find commonality—connections between art and science, theory and practice, or humans and nature, for example. In addition to joining, metaphors also extrapolate new meaning and usage to old figures, thereby disclosing hidden and latent relationships. The deployment of metaphor is therefore both a reconciliatory and innovative practice. In cultivating traditions from within, hermeneutics enables a *re-cognition*: a knowing of things anew.

Much of the difficulty in contemporary landscape architecture lies in

such recoding and transformation. How might seemingly disparate and banal meanings in the landscape discover new life and usage, renewing an art form while also maintaining its tradition? That is, how can we make the ordinariness of everyday situations into something imaginative or fresh, pertinent to our time but not estranged from tradition?

Part of the answer lies in Gadamer's (1975, p. 278) statement that "the heart of the hermeneutical problem is that the one and same tradition must again and again be understood in a different way," and that in landscape architecture this tradition may be said to consist of situations. "Situation" is

an existential term referring to our being in the world. As Veseley (1983) writes:

Situations are the receptacles of experience and of those events which sediment in them a meaning not just as survivals or residues but as an invitation to a sequel, the necessity of a future. Situations endow experience with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire meaning. . . . The richness of situations depend on the reverberations of meaning through the depths of their history (p. 9).

Human situations such as birth, death, love, healing—or on a different

level, public encounters, friendship, learning, discussion, and so on—are what have constituted culture since its conception (Veseley 1983). They are based in a profoundly human mythology that is pregnant with forgotten and latent meanings. Landscapes and buildings have traditionally formed the settings for these situations, framing and symbolizing their content. Highly situated events are thereby embodied and presented as the ultimate frame of reference for any future meaning.<sup>23</sup> Inevitably there is a correspondence between the setting and the situation, a dialogue that not only pertains to the moment but also relates to an ongoing conversation between past and future. A hermeneutical landscape architecture is therefore something that is based on situated experience, placed both within space and time as well as in tradition, and is equally about resurgence or renewal as it is about invention.

In describing hermeneutics and art, George Steiner (1990) wrote that all serious works of art are “critical acts” that embody “an expository reflection on, a value judgement of, the inheritance and context to which they pertain” (p. 11). The previous accomplishments of culture—landscapes, buildings, paintings, literature, and so on—therefore provide a remarkable resource in terms of reflecting on and relating to our present situation.<sup>24</sup> Any such judgment is, however, an imaginative task—not something that can be prescribed by equation or formal coding—and demands that any interpretation occur through working from within, as opposed to conceptual-logical reasoning from without.

#### *The Hermeneutic Landscape*

The landscape is itself a text that is open to interpretation and transformation. It is also a highly situated phenomenon in terms of space, time, and tradition and exists as both the ground and geography of our heritage and change (Figure 14).

Landscape is distinguished from wilderness in that it is land which has been modified by humans. But it is more than this. Landscape is not only a physical phenomenon, but is also a cultural schema, a conceptual filter through which our relationships to wilderness and nature can be understood.

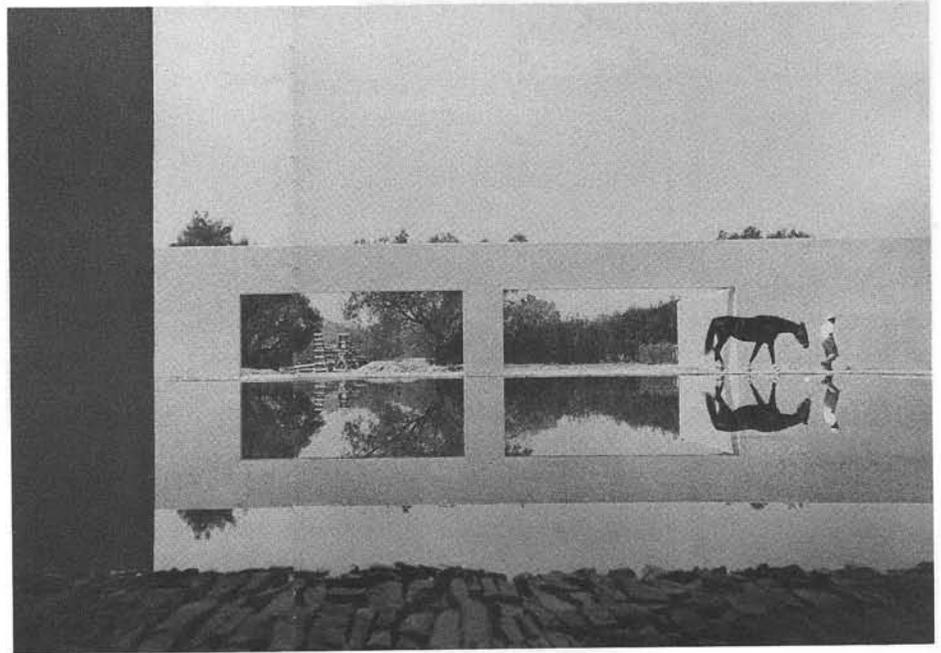


Figure 15. San Cristobal, horse stables and pool. Architect, Luis Barragan (1968). There is something remarkably modern, and yet also traditional, or “familiar,” about Barragan’s work. Source: Emilio Ambasz. 1976. *The Architecture of Luis Barragan*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. Photograph by Carlo de Benedetti, Milan.

It is the well-formed world of occupied places as opposed to the world outside of that—the unplaced place. In other words, prior to language, “landscape” is a phenomenon beyond immediate comprehension; it is not until we choose a prospect and map what we see, marking some aspects, ignoring others, that the landscape acquires meaning.<sup>25</sup> Such interventions include paintings, poems, myths, and literature, in addition to buildings and other interventions upon the land. These works are the encodings that set and enframe human situations. They are the posts that map out a “landscape.”

As time passes, this marked landscape weathers, ever subject to the contingencies of nature. Other points of view are chosen as circumstances change and new ways of marking are overlaid upon the old, producing collagic and weathered overlays. Residua in this topographic palimpsest provide loci for the remembrance, renewal, and transfiguration of a culture’s relationship to the land. Such are the familiar and unexpected places of authentic dwelling.

As a human-made projection, landscape is both text and site, partly

clarifying the world and our place within it. The textual landscape is thus a hermeneutic medium. Landscape architecture might therefore be thought of as the practice of e-scaping and re-scaping our relationship to nature and the “other” through the construction of built worlds. In the desire to reflect both on our modern context and on our inheritance, landscape architecture might practice a hermeneutical plotting of the landscape—a plotting that is as much political and strategic as it is relational and physical. The landscape architect as plotter is simultaneously critic, geographer, communicator, and maker, digging to uncover mute and latent possibilities in the lived landscape. With every “projection” there might follow a rebirth: the artifact of culture and the enigma of nature rendered fuller with every pass.<sup>26</sup> To plot, to map, to dig, to set: Are these not the fundamental traditions of landscape architecture?

As a partial attempt to exemplify such an approach, one might consider the work of Luis Barragan, especially El Pedregal (1945–1950), in the volcanic region of Mexico; or the ranch and stables at San Cristobal (1968); or many of his numerous small chapels and gardens (Figures 15 and 16). The

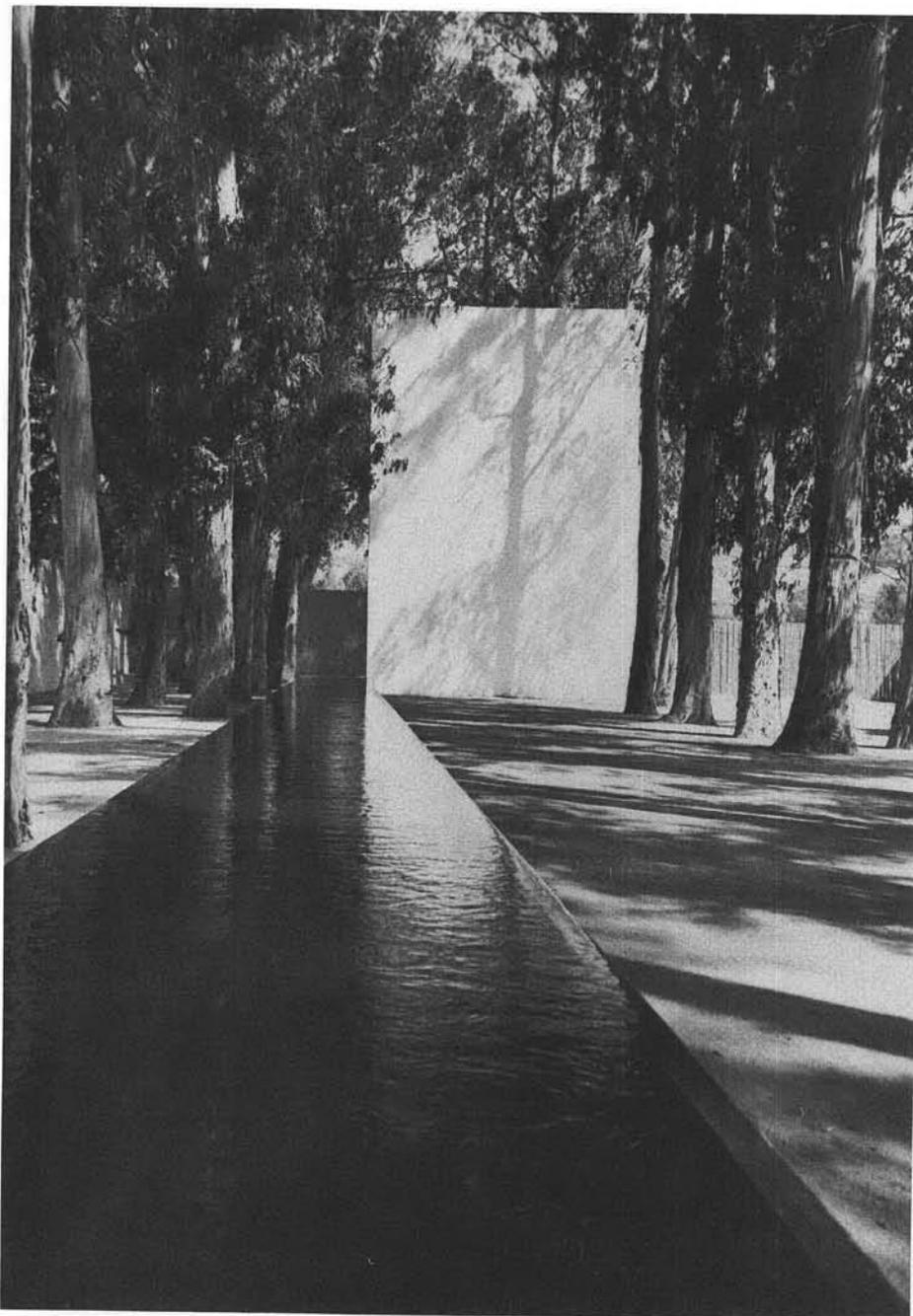


Figure 16. The Plaza and Garden of the Trough, Las Arboledas, Mexico. Architect, Luis Barragan (1950). Barragan is able to re-set traditional activities within modern settings, settings which evoke past accomplishments. There is no simulation of the past nor any radical break from it, but rather there is an "assimilation" or absorbance of the old into the new and the new into the old. Source: Emilio Ambasz. 1976. *The Architecture of Luis Barragan*. New York, Museum of Modern Art. Photograph by Armando Salos Portugal, Mexico City.

built order is truly original and abstract, derived from the tenets of early Modernism, but the spaces are still rooted in the continuity of Barragan's culture, becoming meaningful to a larger culture through their appeal to primordial experiences we as human beings all share. The cultural archetypes are inexhaustibly reformulated with a religious passion—walls, steps, gates, paths, seats, and so on are the elements of both memory and prophecy, providing "places" for the collective orientation and perpetuation of culture. The serenity of enclosure and setting; the poetic accommodation of ritual and cultural situation; the sensual control of body placement and motion so as to arouse expectation and intrigue; the surrealistic quality of composition and arrangement; the hierarchical control of space, light, and tactile experience: all embody the possibility of a lived continuity within a forward-probing culture recalling its heritage.

#### *Conclusion*

A hermeneutic approach to landscape architectural theory might better provide an ontology grounded in the continuity of culture, as opposed to an ideology of blinkered reconstruction on the one hand, or of abstract destructive freedom on the other. What is sought is "a dialogue between culture in its present form and those possibilities forgotten or dormant in the depths of its tradition, alive in memories, in literature, in philosophy" (Veseley 1984, p. 12). Such dialogue demands that one view the history of human endeavor as a deep repository of meaning, wherein certain profoundly human situations continually recur and are embodied in an infinitely rich variety of ways. This quarry of human consciousness might thereby provide the very source of our work, recalling the past while also disclosing new possibilities for a future that transcends the given present. Rather than a mimesis of nature, there might be a mimesis of culture, a mimesis of "exemplary situations"—that which humanity has already *made*, including landscapes (Veseley 1984, p. 12; Perez-Gomez 1988).<sup>27</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 59) talks of "the fecundity of the products of culture which continue to have value after their appearance and which open

a field of investigations in which they perpetually come to life.”<sup>28</sup>

So it is in the most inspired moments in landscape architecture, although we should remember that nature herself always enters into the contract to eventually supersede the encodings of humankind. Indeed nature's infinite complexity will in itself continue to challenge landscape situations and metaphors, demanding hermeneutical reflection through the (re)building of critical landscapes—landscapes that do not stand still but continue to be revisited and transformed through time. Through the building of such landscapes we may well be able to mine the illimitable resources of both culture and nature, bringing modern dwelling toward a greater significance with its present and restoring a sense of wholeness, continuity, and meaning to our lived relations with the landscape<sup>29</sup> (See cover and p. iii).

To forge a landscape as a hermeneutic locus of both divination and restoration, prophecy and memory, is to help figure and orient the collective consciousness of a modern culture still caught in transition.

---

### Acknowledgments

I am particularly grateful to a number of sources and colleagues who provided the basis, discussion, and references for much of this work. The major sources were Alberto Perez-Gomez (1983); Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975, 1976, 1981); Colin Rowe (1978, 1982); and Dalibor Vesely (1983, 1984). I am especially grateful for references and discussion provided by David Leatherbarrow. I also acknowledge the patience, conversation, and editorial advice given by Susan Rademacher Frey, Laurie Olin, Dan Rose, Robert Riley, and Lance Necker. A brief synopsis of this work was presented at the CELA conference in September of 1989.

---

### Notes

1. This is the second of a two-part essay tracing the changes in the role of theory as it pertains to landscape architecture. The first part, entitled “Sounding the Depths”—Origins, Theory, and Representation” (Corner 1990), traced the shift in the understanding of theory from antiquity through the Enlightenment to the present time and outlined how the traditional, symbolic world of pre-enlightenment thought came to an end during the 18th century. Thereafter emerged the increasingly autonomous and self-referential activities of productive theory, aesthetics, and historicism.

“Sounding the Depths” served to set the ground upon which we may critically review theory today. Originally theory, or *theoria*, afforded a complete cosmology, understood and participated in by an entire culture. Gardens and artifacts were conceived as figurative representations of the theoretical world. Today we no longer understand theory in this classical sense. Instead, in our desire to participate in the exigencies of production, we tend to see theory as part of design “method”—a technical theory, procedural know-how. The projection of techno-scientific models onto reality has fundamentally altered the original transcendental sense of theory, displacing poetics and imagination for prescription and efficiency (see note 4). In this way art and landscape can be visually beautiful, of course, but only seldom may they be understood as profound forms of knowledge.

2. What is often referred to as a contemporary “crisis” of meaning and value was foreseen and described during the earlier 20th century by Edmund Husserl (1970). By crisis, of course, one refers to the moment when one is not sure whether a problem may be solved or not, a time of both anxiety and hope.

3. See Perez-Gomez (1983). This tendency to think of theory as objective methodology and technique differs from the traditional conceptions of theory. Unlike the “abstractness,” or autonomy, of modern theory's foundations, traditional theory was based in the *Lebenswelt*. The *Lebenswelt* (life-world) is an old German word that means the world-as-lived, the prereflective sphere of lived and subjective relations. It implies that human knowledge derives primarily from direct experience and observation. See Schutz and Luckman (1973).

4. Refer to Leatherbarrow (1990) and Corner (1990). *Theoria* was the original Greek formulation of theory. It emerged as a way to comprehend observed phenomena in the natural world, especially in relation to holy practices. Practice was understood as a theoretical form of reconciliation between humans and their being in the world.

5. By “hard” I mean that the world has become so clear, especially in empirical terms, that it has lost much of its enigma and mystery. For many the world has become impenetrable and unyielding—a cold and neutral entity devoid of wonder. This makes it very difficult for a culture to “figure itself.” To figure is a term used in rhetoric, meaning “to form figuratively,” especially through the use of metaphors. We do this as humans so as to be able to imagine and understand our human condition (to figure out). This is largely accomplished through the quest of *making*, or giving form to ideas (figuring through figuration).

6. Quoted in Rowe (1982) from Charles Osborne, 1979. *W. H. Auden: The Life of a Poet*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich p. 329.

7. It is interesting to compare modern views of “nature” to those of the ancient Greeks, who understood the world through a more holistic concept called *physis*. *Physis* represented the total sum of being and existence. There was no separation between humans, nature, and gods. The rationality of techno-science, however, has now produced a world of separation—humans and their technologies are dominant, while the world of nature is subjugated. See Heidegger (1977b).

8. Note that within the full scope of a paradigm, theory refers to something much more limited in function and structure. Kuhn (1970) prefers the notion of a paradigm as being similar to a “disciplinary matrix” (pp. 176–191), within which there are (1) a host of symbolic generalizations (laws), (2) particular metaphors and analogies (language), (3) values, and (4) model exemplars.

9. That is to say, models and exemplars have formed the greater part of our education. They are concrete, tangible forms representing solutions to problems under certain paradigmatic conditions. For a discipline so focused on spatial-visual structures, this will most likely remain a fundamental part of our education and practice.

10. The Kriers belong to a group called the neo-rationalists, who advocate an approach that seeks to provide an entire spatial typology across the social spectrum, as in an inventory or classification.

11. Refer to Mircea Eliade (1959). It is important to distinguish between *archetype* as a “situation” or idea, and *type* as specific form or pattern. Archetypes are human situations that persist across time and space, like “archaic remnants” (Jung). They are not bound to form or image and can be represented or interpreted in many ways. Colquhoun (1981) makes a distinction here between type as “archetype” and type as a very specific form. He says: “In the first sense, type has a genetic connotation: it is the essence that has been stamped on the original version which each subsequent form will recall. In the second sense, type merely has the connotation of a de-facto form” (p. 15).

12. History, and therefore paradigmatic “types,” may be viewed in one of two ways. Colquhoun (1981, pp. 11–15) defines the first view as “culturalist,” wherein history is an immutable repository of eternal values “with a myth of origins and a belief in a golden age in which those values were manifest in a pure form.” Here, architectural form is something external to historical evolution, replete with universal and unchanging laws. In the second view, history is understood as a series of distinct epochs, each with its “own self-justificatory system of values.” Here, the view is that all sociocultural phenomena are historically determined and are therefore relative. Colquhoun describes the first as a “normative” view of history, based on an idealized, exemplary past and which is therefore *absolutist*. The second he defines as a *relativist* view, where cultures and forms are relative to space, time, and cultural circumstance.

13. Johanne Wolfgang Goethe (1794). *Werke*. vol. 47, p. 313. Quoted in Peter Burger (1984).

14. Traditional art was understood as a *mimesis* of the primary reality of the phenomenal world given to perception. It was a representation of an idea outside itself, as opposed to modernist art, which sought to defer representation and refer only to its own making. See Greenberg (1965) and Burger (1984).

15. Andre Vera (1912). *Le nouveau jardin*. Paris: Emile Paul. pp. iii-v.

16. Deconstruction, a radical form of Poststructuralism evolved in literary criticism during the past twenty years. As a philosophy, deconstruction has been most fully developed by Jacques Derrida. In the architectural arts one may refer to Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman, or Daniel Libeskind.

17. “Because for thousands of years we have been looking at the world with moral, aesthetic, and

religious claims; with blind inclination, passion, or fear; and have indulged ourselves fully in the bad habits of illogical thought, this world has become so strangely colorful, frightful, profound, soulful; it has acquired color, but we have been the painters" (Nietzsche 1984, p. 24).

18. The "primary structure" is the mutable and finite realm, which is "given" to sensory perception. This world of phenomena forms the realm of our existence. Perception is our primary form of knowing and does not exist without our a priori of the body's structure and its engagement with the world. The body is the locus of all existential formulations, and the mind is that which is capable of finding secondary meaning within the phenomenal. See Merleau-Ponty (1962).

19. *Techne-poiesis* was the original union between technique and knowledge; thus the phrase "embodied making." Traditionally, architects had to make in order to learn their *metier*. Logical-conceptual theories could not be substitutes for the traditional apprenticeship. *Techne* was originally the dimension of revelatory knowledge (revealing truth) and *poiesis* the dimension of creativity and symbolic representation (making). This unity was dissolved during the 17th century, when *techne* became a body of instrumental-productive knowledge (technology) and *poiesis* became the work of modern aesthetics.

20. Tradition can be likened to a geological continuity into which we are all embedded, our contemporary times being the outcome of a complex historical stratigraphy complete with rift and slippage. The "geological" metaphor is used frequently by contemporary philosophers and critics such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault (1972), especially when describing the ebbs and flows of historical production.

21. Hermeneutics is a theory of understanding and interpretation. It relates to textual exegesis (interpretation and explanation) and to the more general problems of meaning and language. Hermeneutics necessarily involves reflection and cannot be reduced to rule-governed technique or method. Interpreters are not passive observers, but bring with themselves certain ideas and knowledge that necessarily enter into the interpretation (i.e., an inevitable prejudice or bias). Interpreters can only interpret with respect to their own particular situations and circumstances. As time, place, and circumstance vary, so too do arguments. As Gadamer (1975, p. 258) states, there is a "placing of oneself within a process of tradition." Among hermeneutic's contemporary advocates are Paul Ricoeur (1974) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975, 1976, 1981).

22. The renewed interest in hermeneutics is in response to much of 20th century philosophy. In general, contemporary philosophy has been concerned with overcoming the alienation of the "subject" from a world reduced to "objects." Husserl (1970) largely initiated this concern by expressing a desire to "gain access to the pre-reflective givenness of things in a way that would not be distorted by theories or anticipatory ideas of any kind" (Gadamer 1976, p. xlii). The movement to recover that which precedes theoretical objectification seeks to "situate" consciousness within the realm of lived experience (phenomenology). It therefore attempts to escape the methodologism that pervades modern thought by discovering nonobjectifying modes of disclosure.

23. Embodiment and setting must not be confused with "type" or model. Type is only the

result of an eidetic abstraction (imaginary ideal of history) and is therefore only partial or secondary. The primary reality of meaning is grounded in experience and cannot be substituted for intellectualized "certainties." Veseley (1984, p. 9) writes: "The typicality of experience in contrast to a type is a historically evolved phenomenon which cannot be understood by reference to form only. It is an embodied meaning which always precedes a particular form. Reading for instance, is essential to any vision of a library, but always transcends it."

24. Veseley (1984, p. 8) writes: "It is the miraculous power of tradition to mediate between different experiences and their different forms of embodiment that enables us to open the horizon of our present situation to the depths of history and to establish a dialogue with realities that are apparently mute or dead."

25. By "marking" I mean to suggest the whole spectrum of ways in which different peoples signify their relationship to the land. More often than not, these signs are physically constructed, but this need not always be the case, as in the aboriginal songlines, for example.

26. I borrow this analogy from David Leatherbarrow (1990).

27. Veseley (1984, pp. 11–12) writes: "The nature of exemplary situation is similar to the nature of the phenomena described in different terminology as institution, deep structure, paradigm, archetype, or archetypal image . . . the street, the garden, the house, and of course the town itself . . . the exemplary situation can be cultivated, reinterpreted and transcended, but never completely replaced. This is the essence but also the limit of the traditional process of interpretation, known in its Classical form as *mimesis*."

28. Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 59) goes on to say that "the productions of the past, which are the data of our time, themselves once went beyond anterior productions towards a future which we are, and in this sense called for (among others) the metamorphosis which we impose upon them."

29. The terms "wholeness" and "continuity" are not meant to imply a view of culture as something monolithic, but rather are meant to suggest two things. First, there appear to be certain archetypal situations, or acts, that still hold across a number of cultures, even though their specific forms vary significantly. There are certain primordial experiences we as humans all share. Second, wholeness and continuity can apply to one particular culture or to a number of cultures. Difference, contamination, collision, and diversity may in fact be maintained, celebrated, or embodied. Indeed such tension may be the very foundation of cultural wholeness and continuity. Wholeness depends upon a highly articulated richness and diversity of cultural life, situation, and setting.

## References

- Alexander, Christopher. 1964. *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bataille, Georges. 1987. *Eroticism*. Trans. by Mary Dalwood. London: Boyars.

- Baudrillard, Jean. 1983. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e)/Columbia University.
- . 1988. *The Ecstasy of Communication*. New York: Semiotext(e)/Columbia University.
- Bruno, Guilianà. 1987. "Ramble City: Postmodernism and 'Bladerunner'." In *October*, vol. 41 (61–74). Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Burger, Peter. 1984. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Trans. by Michael E. Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Caputo, John. 1987. *Radical Hermeneutics*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Carl, Peter. 1981. Preface to *Architecture and Continuity*. Dalibor Veseley. London: Architectural Association.
- Colquhoun, Alan. 1981. "Modern Architecture and Historicity." In *Essays in Architectural Criticism*. Cambridge: MIT Press and Oppositions Books.
- . 1989. *Modernity and the Classical Tradition*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Corner, James. 1990. "Sounding the Depths—Origins, Theory, and Representation." *Landscape Journal* 9(2): 60–78.
- Downing, Andrew Jackson. 1841. *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*. New York: Orange Judd Company.
- Eisenman, Peter. 1988. *Peter Eisenman*. Special edition *A&U*. Tokyo: Kenchiku to toshi.
- . 1990. *Wexner Center for the Visual Arts*. Introduction by Robert Stearns with essays by Anthony Vidler and Rafael Moneo. New York: Rizzoli.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1959. *Cosmos and History*. New York: Harper.
- Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Frampton, Kenneth. 1983. "Towards a Critical Regionalism." In Hal Foster (ed.) *The Anti-Aesthetic*. Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1975. *Truth and Method*. New York: Seabury Press.
- . 1976. *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1981. *Reason in the Age of Science*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Greenberg, Clement. 1965. "Modernist Painting." *Art and Literature* 4 (Spring): 193–201.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1983. "Modernity—An Incomplete Project." In Hal Foster (ed.) *The Anti-Aesthetic*. Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1977a. *Basic Writings*. New York: Harper and Row.
- . 1977b. *The Question Concerning Technology*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- Heisenberg, Werner. 1970. *The Physicist's Conception of Nature*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1970. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Trans. by D. Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Huyssen, Andreas. 1986. *After the Great Divide*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Irwin, Robert. 1985. *Being and Circumstance: Notes toward a Conditional Art*. Lawrence Weschler (ed.) Larkspur Landing, Calif.: Lapis Press with the Pace Gallery.
- Junod, Philippe. 1976. *Transparence et Opacité*. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme.

- Krier, Leon. 1984. *Houses, Palaces, Cities: Architectural Design Special Profile*. No. 54. London: Architectural Design, AD Editions.
- Krier, Rob. 1988. *Architectural Composition*. New York: Rizzoli.
- Kuhn, Thomas. 1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2d ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lang, Jon. 1987. *Creating Architectural Theory*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Leatherbarrow, David. 1988. "Review of *Thought and Place*." *Journal of Architectural Education*, 41(3): 52-55.
- . 1990. "Book Review of *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*." *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 43(2): 51-53.
- Liotard, Jean-Francois. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition - A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- . 1964. *Signs*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1967. *The Will to Power*. W. Kaufmann (Ed.) New York: Random House/Vintage Books.
- . 1984. *Human, All Too Human*. Trans. by Marion Faber. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Olin, Laurie. 1988. "Form, Meaning, and Expression in Landscape Architecture." *Landscape Journal* 7(2): 149-168.
- Perez-Gomez, Alberto. 1983. *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- . 1988. "Abstraction in Modern Architecture." In *VIA 9*. Cambridge: MIT Press and the University of Pennsylvania.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1961. *History and Truth*. Trans. by Charles A. Kelbey. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.
- . 1974. *The Conflict of Interpretation*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.
- Rowe, Colin. 1978. *Collage City*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- . 1982. "Program vs. Paradigm." *The Cornell Journal of Architecture*. No.2: 8-19. New York: Rizzoli.
- Schutz, Alfred, and T. Luckman. 1973. *The Structures of the Lifeworld*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.
- Sitte, Camille. 1965. *The Art of Building Cities According to Artistic Principles*. Trans. by George R. Collins and Christiane Craseman Collins. New York: Random House.
- Smithson, Robert. 1979. *Writings*. New York: New York University Press.
- Steele, Fletcher. 1930. "New Pioneering in Garden Design." *Landscape Architecture* 20(3): 159-177.
- Steiner, George. 1990. *Real Presences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tschumi, Bernard. 1979. "Architecture and Transgression." *Oppositions*. No.7. Cambridge: MIT Press and Oppositions Books.
- . 1988. *Cinegramme Folie: Le Parc de la Villette*. New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press.
- . 1990. *Questions of Space: Lectures on Architecture*. London: Architectural Association.
- Vera, Andre. 1912. *Le Nouveau Jardin*. Paris: Emile Paul.
- Veseley, Dalibor. 1983. *Architecture and Continuity*. London: Architectural Association.
- . 1984. "Architecture and the Conflict of Representation." In *AA FILES 8*. London: Architectural Association.
- . 1988. "On the Relevance of Phenomenology." In *Form, Being, Absence: Pratt Journal of Architecture*. No.2: 59-62. New York, Rizzoli.
- Wilford, Michael. 1984. "Off to the Races, or Going to the Dogs?" In *Urbanism: AD Profile 51*. London: Architectural Design Publications.