

A Ten Point Guide to Difference in Landscape Architecture

Rod Barnett

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one

The objects and processes of the world with which landscape architects engage by means of design tend to change through time. A key concept when considering this change through time is that of difference, a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze. If we are going to understand the elements of the world as self-organizing systems, nonlinear processes and dissipative structures, the idea of difference is critical.

two

Difference is tied into the notion of becoming, the idea that everything that exists only becomes and never is. The changing dynamics of the natural, the social and the urban worlds can all be conceived as things differing continually from and in themselves. The human beings who encounter this unfolding difference in the world are also continually differing from themselves. We have, therefore, a becoming different of many diverse conditions, so that each encounter between these conditions is a novel encounter – unscripted, unpredicted and always open to further novelty.

three

Deleuze does not mean by difference that the some things are dynamic and ever-changing and some other thing – a substratum – persists, or remains identical to itself. The concept of difference does not entail a version of the one and the many, a multiplicity that bodies forth from an unchanging unity (be that God, self, nation or nature). Instead there is only difference. Everything is transforming itself – recreating itself – all the time. All things are engaged in an ongoing genesis of themselves. It is important to understand that morphogenetic processes produce localized, quite specific conditions, and that it is these processes that landscape architects deal with when designing open systems such as urban precincts, waterfronts, parks and other constructed ecologies.

four

The great beauty of this theorizing of change is that designers no longer have to ask “What is ...?” Instead the questions become “Where ...?” or “How ...?” or “When ...?” or “How many ...?” or “In which case ...?” or “From what viewpoint ...?” In other words we become concerned with what things do rather than what they are. “How does this urban stream silt the flood plane?” “How many species of fauna inhabit this edge condition?” “From what viewpoint do these residents consider this tract of open undeveloped terrain?” People, birds, soils, trees are not understood as having identities or essences. “Things are constituted by virtue of the differential relations they enter into, both internally and in relation to other things” (Patton 1994: 152).

five

Change and difference, then, are not simply happening out there. Nature is in constant flux and humans are part of this flux. Human activity contributes as much to the development – the self-differentiation – of nature as nature does to their development. Thus, human beings are in a constant state of productive practice: the production of the concrete, physical open-ended world understood as a composition of forces in which other forces (including us) are always intervening, contributing to and participating in. The world, i.e. what is given to us in experience, is a difference-driven process. Many phenomena, in geology, biology, economics and social theory – whatever – emerge from the interplay of differences (De Landa 1994: 4). Matter itself processes its own imminent resources for the generation of form. Material systems are continually traversed by strong flows of matter and energy, and it is these flows that enable systems to self-organize (see the Ten Point Guide to open Systems).

six

The field of our endeavors as landscape architects is a spatio-temporal aggregation of people and things that are continually being brought into relation with each other. Humans are always seeking to combine their relations with others in order to empower and enrich their capacity to become themselves. We get better at this by developing our capacity to relate our feelings, conduct and intentions to different modes of being. The tasks of the landscape architect are a) to develop milieux that enable this to occur in multiple ways and b) to present different modes of becoming to each other. The landscape architect is engaged in a continuous experimental process of composing or constructing qualitatively different modes of existence and relating them to each other.

seven

An especially critical aspect of Deleuze's concept of difference, and the ongoing self-differentiation of things, is its overturning of the representational order of being. Plato initiated this order with his Theory of Forms which sought to understand the world as a copy of an ideal 'heaven' in which the true forms of things dwelled. The worldly idea of beauty, for instance, could only be understood with reference to the idea form of beauty. Courage in a human being was a copy of the ideal model of courage, and so on. This model-copy theory has characterized most thinking about how we know and value things since Plato's time. The notion that things self-differentiate does not require the model-copy order. Instead all things simply become different from themselves on the basis of the matter-energy flows that course through them.

eight

A particularly interesting aspect of Plato's theory was what he called the simulacrum. This was the case of the bad copy. The person who pretended to be courageous, for instance, to serve their own ends. Deleuze argues that the simulacrum destabilizes the reign of representation. The simulacrum exists in and of itself, without grounding in or reference to a model: its existence is "unmediated" (Deleuze 1994: 29). Each simulacrum is its own model. This analysis helps us reframe or reinterpret "artificial" landscape conditions such as a culverted or canalized river. The Los Angeles River, for instance, can be thought of as not a "not-river." That is to say, a natural river system is not a model that the LA River imperfectly copies; the LA River is not a river that is "in error" or "inferior" to a natural river system. Understood as a simulacrum the LA River exists in and of itself as a condition to which a range of attributes and functions can be ascribed in terms only of the performative parameters of the canalized river itself. (Do not ask what it is, but how it works ...)

Once we depart from the model-copy dialectic, we can begin not only to reinterpret, reanalyze and revalue the LA River as a functioning system, but we can also focus more clearly on its capacities as such a system, and address inadequacies with respect to its own productivity as an organizational and distributive regime. We should attend more precisely to the becoming-different of the prosthesis itself. We should affirm, rather than negate, its individual condition.

nine

The model-copy dialectic occasions a profound delimiting of the power of the prosthesis to inhabit and reorganize the forces with which it deals. If the LA River is regarded as a unity, as an entity that achieves and embodies a static condition it is very difficult to understand it as a process that continuously differs from itself in multiple ways. The denial of difference implies an a priori conceptualization, a telos, a meaning and through these a logic of landscape architectural practice that crushes open practice under an image of the Same, or Similar, and betrays what it means to practice openly.

ten

Thinking of design as already ethical, already inhabited by a moral purpose highlights a concern we should have that this conception of design – as a force for good – is in the service of political and moral forces that themselves require examination. These forces lead us away from design itself as a practice that responds to its unmediated encounter with the world, a practice that must create openly in order to cope with the violence and force of these encounters, their randomness and disorder. Design should be seen not as a

bearer of moral purpose but as a self-engendering act of creation. This is design without image, without purpose. How should such design operate in the world?

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