

A Ten Point Guide to Nature in Landscape Architecture

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one

When the ancient Greeks invented nature (500 – 300BC), they did so to explain the relationships between unity and multiplicity on the basis of *nomos* (laws) rather than *mythos* (myths). After the Greek break with mythic *poesis* (an irreversible rupture?) certain kinds of questions –scientific, philosophical- about the world made sense, and certain kinds of questions – mythic - about the world no longer made sense (Collingwood 1945). The early Greek framework determined western concepts of nature by determining what can legitimately be asked of reality and what cannot. This is the birth of western philosophy. The transition from mythic to philosophical explanations of the world is often regarded as a transition from an attitude which addresses the world as 'thou' to one which describes it as 'it' (Frankfort, Frankfort et al. 1971)

two

For the presocratic philosophers (those who preceded Socrates) the question, What is nature? was the same as What are things made of? That is, it was a scientific question. Thales of Miletus, widely regarded as the first philosopher, placed the One at the basis of all things, like a substratum, an enduring material condition that does not change even as the world changes. He attempted to address the phenomena of change, to explain plurality and difference. What is the one thing out of which all things are made? The presocratic philosophers saw that in spite of all the change and transition around them (birth, growth, decay, death) there must be something permanent. Something primary, that persists. Something within, or intimately belonging to, the things of the world and which is the origin of their behavior: a homogeneous primitive matter that local differentiation belies. This, then, is the beginning of the dialogic interplay between the ideas of the One and the Many.

three

Nature (all that there is, the world, the universe) was the One and the Many. This explanation depended on an understanding of multiplicity as illusory, and the One as Real. A number of early Greek concepts characterized this discourse, and have done so ever since:

The distinction between natural and artificial

The distinction between natural and supernatural

Local differentiation can be explained by recourse to an underlying principle

This principle informs all matter (or substance)

Nature is intelligible

Nature is Being

four

The Greek conception of the world was the basis for the development of natural philosophy, and eventually the rise of science. There has always been a counter-tradition, however, beginning with Heraclitus of Ephesus. This alternative discourse argued that there was no substratum, no prior material condition that underpinned differentiation. It said that there was only multiplicity - nothing solid behind the differences that characterize the world. This counter-tradition was marginalized by the success of science, particularly Cartesian and Newtonian science, but re-emerged with the development of thermodynamics in the 19th century and the re-conception of space and time as a dynamic field or continuum that has no substrate (Serres 1983).

five

In philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century this position was set out by Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead. Instead of difference being a condition of a separate cause and a spatial effect, Bergson argues that difference relates primarily to the temporal rather than the spatial dimension of being (Bergson 1911). For Bergson, the difference of a thing is sustained through an internal production where the cause is not separate from the effect. There is no separation between difference and the thing. Through a positive, internal movement – the process of differentiation – being unfolds and reveals its multiple differences. Being is becoming. Becoming is an emanation of being, an actualization, a process of creation. With no pre-formed order to dictate its form, the process of actualization must be a 'creative evolution', an original production of the multiplicity of the actual through differentiation (Bergson 1911). This is a critique of order and an affirmation of organization. It is the multiplicity of organization, which is always indeterminate, in that it is creative and original – organization is always unforeseeable. The creative process of organization is always an art. Nature is the creative evolution of the virtual into the actual.

six

Landscape architecture remained untouched by the work of the 'philosophers of process' through the 20th century. The framework of the One and the Many polarized theoretical and design discourse and stymied effective environmental design. How strange then, and how appropriate, that the way out of this unhelpful binary thinking has been led by science and philosophy, the very discourses that created it in the first place. Writers such as Deleuze and Guattari, Serres and De Landa have laid the groundwork for a conception of nature that does not separate it from the social and cultural (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Serres 1995; De Landa 1999). Instead *nomos* and *physis* are productions of historical and material processes derived from the same or similar 'abstract machines.' Influenced by Deleuze, De Landa works against the attitudes that see history merely as the arena of texts, discourse, ideologies and metaphors, and traces the concrete movements and interplays of matter and energy through the domains of economics, biology and linguistics. He sees the source of all concrete forms in internal 'morphogenetic capabilities' that lie within the flow of matter-energy itself (De Landa 1998). When understood as sharing both the diagrams and the processes of systemic self-organization, it does not matter whether the landscapes humans inhabit are natural or cultural; their valency is their energetic Becoming.

seven

Because landscape architecture has a disciplinary investment in ideas of nature there are many reasons why it needs to re-think its understanding of the ideas this word mobilizes. That the primary Greek theories of nature placed human beings outside nature, that nature was regarded as an 'it,' that human history is the history of societies and their development – these are all ideas and attitudes that are consequent upon the Greek idea of the real One and the illusory Many. If there is only multiplicity, however - only difference - then humans are part of this differential field, and the theoretical subject of landscape architecture becomes the problematic of the field itself. The questions become, What is difference? What is emergence? What is the nature of the social if it is natural too?

eight

Since the 1990s landscape architects have been attempting to deal with these questions. The influence of ecology, as a science-based discipline, has both helped and hindered the development of a landscape architectural response to the challenge of multiplicity and difference (Spirn 1984). Ecology has contributed in the investigation of open systems theory and field theory as ways of understanding the world with which landscape architecture deals. But it has distanced humans from this world even as it has argued that we are part of it. If humans are part of the dynamic flux, then they are conditioned by the operations of that flux. The operations of emergence, difference, affect, transgression and multiplicity influence how we think and feel, and what we do. When we enter into combinations with the things of the changing world, our world changes too. Landscape architecture needs deeply to consider the nature of this co-existence.

nine

Landscape architecture becomes an art of organizing encounters. When humans come into contact with the attributes and affections of nature through the exercise of this art, they make it possible for themselves to act in such a way as to augment their own natures, and increase what Spinoza called their power of acting (Spinoza 2002). Designed landscapes can be special terrains where lived experience is an admixture of different types of relationality and encounter. The possible relations into which people may enter in pleasure gardens, for instance, are vast. The confrontation with nature as a chaotic and creative power of life is a condition of the specific operations by means of which, in these gardens, nature is disrupted and re-organized. Designed landscapes are marked out from the processes of separation and combination that are imminent in the natural world. They are declensions from, or diversions of, natural processes.

ten

If landscapes are products of human negotiation with the world, then landscape architectural discourse must encompass the fundamental operations of human becoming in the world. These operations occur by means of a deep immersion in the structures and processes in which the human subject engages, and which make of landscape architecture a means of encounter, a possibility for world-construction and an art of inhabitation. Ideas of emergence and becoming are critical to this project, for human experience is a continual manifestation of these ideas. Landscapes are fields of emergence and difference. Landscape design can place humans within these fields in such a way as to enrich and expand the possibilities of existence.

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