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That Faint Semblance of Eden

Problems with Landscape Design History

Jill Sinclair

Jill Sinclair is a British landscape historian and author. Trained in landscape design history at Harvard, she now lives and works in France. Her first book, *Fresh Pond: the History of a Cambridge Landscape*, was published by The MIT Press in April 2009. With a particular interest in the changing nature of historic design preservation, she is currently completing a thesis on the relationship between sustainability and character in heritage gardens.

Landscape design intuitively seems like an activity beneficial to the environment.¹ It preserves and celebrates green spaces even in dense urban areas; it works with the very stuff of nature – earth, water, air, life. Starting small and young, designed landscapes grow and mature, becoming more desirable with the patina of age, gainsaying design's current preoccupation with newness and built-in obsolescence. There is little evidence here of *influenza* – John de Graaf's concept of a contagious condition of overload and waste stemming from the constant pursuit of more. Instead designed landscapes seem to encourage us to cherish the past, and to wait for the future. We believe that they allow us to experience the power of nature unsullied by human activity and development. As a result, landscape designers can easily see themselves on the side of the angels, custodians of ancient values in the face of modern lifestyles and material cultures.

Yet landscape design is implicated in resource depletion, climate change, and pollution of the soil and groundwater supplies. As cities have grown and technology has

proliferated, so we have designed and maintained landscapes that depend on unsustainable practices to survive. Natural ecosystems have been ignored, damaged and destroyed, and healthy soil has been disrupted, releasing its stores of sequestered carbon dioxide. Watercourses have been dammed or rerouted or forced underground as large areas are paved with non-porous materials. Having been transported from distant sources, exotic plants require the application of chemical pesticides and frequent watering to survive, and have often replaced native plant material, which is suppressed and even poisoned with herbicides. Tree cover has been reduced or removed, leading to less carbon dioxide absorption, decreased capacity for stormwater management, and less summer shade and winter shelter for buildings. Elaborate fountains and features are installed that consume precious sources of water and energy. Other widespread and unsustainable practices include the production and long-distance shipping of materials, especially cement, waste disposal in landfill, and the use of mechanised maintenance tools (mowers, hedge trimmers, leaf-blowers, outdoor heaters) powered by fossil fuels. Sustainable activities traditionally carried out in gardens, such as food production, clothes drying, and composting, have been condemned by designers as unaesthetic and moved indoors or off-site.²

In addition, an increasing interest in landscape design history – and the celebration of famous past designers – has served to encourage unsustainable restoration and conservation procedures, and the wilful destruction and replacement of existing landscapes.

It is easy to argue that such practices have arisen because we knew no better, that it is only recently we have grasped the environmental impact of our actions. But in landscape design, and especially in our attitudes to historic designed landscapes, there is still an overwhelming resistance to a more rigorous sustainability. This has its roots in humanity's complex, ambiguous, contradictory relationship with nature. On the one hand, we see the natural world as the embodiment of reality and goodness, something that provides an absolute moral standard or 'norm' and that should be preserved at all costs. It represents an imagined essence of mankind: the good or natural impulses that we followed before civilisation and industrial development tainted us. On the other hand, nature is 'red in tooth and claw,' brutal, primitive, something to be conquered or overcome. In this view, civilisation has allowed us to rise above our bad, natural impulses. Both of these attitudes implicitly define nature as that part of the world not modified by people, and thus we are set apart from or against nature.³ Coupled with this is the West's unreflexive anthropocentrism, the long-standing view of humanity as the epitome of creation, in which nature has no intrinsic value outside its role in supporting and enriching human life.⁴

In this way of viewing the world, historic designed landscapes are – to use the biblical terminology – examples of humanity exercising our dominion over nature: we seek to subdue the land through design, to manipulate it into something that provides human pleasure, that displays political power, social class or privileged taste. Not only do we see nature as ours to suppress, remodel and tame, but also as something which is essentially visual. All too often, landscape design has been about simple surface aesthetics – nature portrayed as something static and separate, some pleasant scenery, a shallow visual decoration. The same issue, of the primacy of the sense of sight, occurs equally in architecture, where the potential to design buildings that offer complex, sensory explorations of fundamental aspects of human existence (dwelling, domestication, place, time) is frequently reduced to the production of a series of architectural images designed to be admired from afar. In interior design as well, spaces are devised, not to nurture and echo how people live, but as “mostly static responses to primarily visual concepts of beauty.”⁵ Indeed, in Heidegger’s view, humanity in the modern age is ignoring the fundamental issues of existence and being, choosing to reduce the world to a simple fixed image, so that everything is conceived and grasped as a picture.

The essentially visual view of designed landscapes becomes especially troubling in the maintenance and restoration of works by ‘star’ designers of the past. Historic designed landscapes are often treated as stable, two-dimensional representations, essentially no different from the picturesque landscape paintings that were often their inspiration, and capable of being viewed, maintained and restored in the same way.⁶ Historic designed landscapes are thus seen as finished art, pictorial idealised versions of nature,⁷ and their visual images are painstakingly preserved as if in aspic, despite the essential capacity of plant material to grow and evolve. Lost or damaged features are restored or rebuilt, often at astonishing expense, and highly artificial plant groupings are maintained through intensive cultivation, despite the danger of such items ultimately being exotic features largely inexplicable without their full context, like a caged animal in a zoo.⁸

Success in managing a historic designed landscape is judged on how far the site has retained its appearance since its creation (or since some other significant point in the past), as represented in photographs, drawings and plans; and on how beautiful it is considered to be. This “tyranny of the visual”⁹ frequently means that any signs of native plant succession or subsequent human interaction with the landscape are ripped out. At its heart, the often extensive maintenance work seeks to conceal or suppress natural cycles of death and decay, forever presenting the landscape as green, preened and traditionally pretty. Some critics argue that this leaves historic designed landscapes as little more than

“graveyards above the ground – congealed memories of the past that act as a pretext for reality.”¹⁰

Of course many designers and writers have argued for more sustainable, ecologically friendly landscape design, from Jens Jensen’s championing of native prairie style parks in America’s Midwest to Ian McHarg’s hugely influential environmental planning methods. Recent shifts towards greater sustainability are plentiful, but almost none apply to historic designed landscapes. There are examples of preserving and regenerating landscapes clearly disturbed by humanity, providing a sort of post-industrial greening (from Latz + Partners’ extraordinary Duisburg-Nord park developed around the remnants of a highly polluted steelworks in Germany’s Ruhr valley, to New York’s current plans to turn the Fresh Kills landfill into a vast public park, one of the most controversial of many landscape design projects that have capped and recycled old dumping grounds). So-called eco-revelatory design is also increasing, in which artists and landscape architects seek to restore and display natural ecosystems as primary features in new landscape designs. These have generated much academic interest¹¹ but are still far from mainstream, and are often regarded as unkempt by the viewing public¹² and, ironically, as nonfunctioning by ecological scientists.¹³

The threat of climate change has added a new impetus to the shift towards more sustainable design. With likely phenomena including increasing temperatures, greater numbers of heat waves, rising sea levels, more frequent intense rainfall, and larger areas affected by drought,¹⁴ the impact will be as significant for designed landscapes as for any part of the built environment. Both professional and amateur practitioners are starting to see the need to reduce global warming through changing practices, and to be prepared for its results: damage and destruction of landscape features by flood, storm, fire and drought, changing patterns of vegetation, and new distributions of pests and diseases. This growing awareness has led to a plethora of guides and manuals for designing sustainable new parks and gardens – from books aimed at the general public, such as *Sustainable Landscaping for Dummies*, to lengthy technical guidelines on sustainable site design for American landscape architects, which advocate the non-disturbance of healthy soils, waste reduction, the choice of locally-grown, low maintenance plants, the reuse of materials salvaged from the site or nearby, and the use of non-fossil-fuel-based maintenance tools. In the UK, recent advice has included the need to design gardens with space for practical activities such as clothes drying and composting that would increase greenhouse gas emissions if carried out elsewhere.¹⁵ More sustaining technologies are certainly gaining ground;¹⁶ sometimes plant pests are being removed by hand rather than by chemical treatment, or less susceptible plants are being cultivated;

occasionally grass is maintained by grazing animals instead of by petrol-powered mower.

In their different ways, all these efforts – regenerative development of industrial sites, eco-revelatory design, guidance on environmentally-friendly landscape practices – can be seen as part of a drive to reclaim landscape design as an exemplar of sustainable practice. But historic designed landscapes are as yet almost exempt from such considerations. Few if any historic designed landscapes are managed sustainably. Advice from preservation bodies may include environmental issues, but the main focus is still on preserving the historical appearance of designed landscapes ultimately at the expense of other considerations. Even in guidelines for the modern-day rebuilding of non-surviving historic landscapes, for instance, one national agency unequivocally recommends against “obscuring or damaging the appearance of the reconstructed landscape in the process of providing environmental protection ... [or] energy efficiency.”¹⁷ Similarly, the Sustainable Sites Initiative (an American collaborative programme that seeks explicitly to mitigate the climatic impact of designed landscapes) is struggling to find any way of balancing sustainable practices with the preservation of historic character. Its latest draft guidance simply recommends that historic designed sites should be protected, and invites suggestions on how they might be expected to contribute to sustainability.¹⁸ Even iconoclastic designer Richard Haag (creator of the groundbreaking Gas Works Park in Seattle, in 1975, which preserved, cleansed and recycled an old industrial plant into a public park) challenged the idea of incorporating environmental improvements on a university campus because he thought such changes might compromise its historic designed character, and that would be too high a price to pay.¹⁹

Such judgments about the preeminence of history are pervasive. John Ruskin expressed views still held by many today when he portrayed historic designed landscapes as repositories of stable layers of historical meaning, which needed to be preserved so that the past could be interpreted and recovered.²⁰ For many people, such landscapes are sacrosanct because they provide a visible link back to a perceived golden age, implicitly even to the garden of Eden, a sign of the common human nostalgia for a seemingly idyllic past.²¹ While some commentators have fumed against this view of nature and history as simplistic sentimentality,²² their views have found no traction in public opinion. The most valued historic designed landscapes are those that appear to offer constancy, which have been maintained always to reflect the static vision of what is believed to be the designer’s original intent.²³ Thus possible modern environmental improvements in and around historic designed landscapes (such as rainwater storage systems to replace the use of potable water in plant irrigation, flood defences to protect vulnerable landscapes, and wind turbines to generate the power

necessary to manage the land) are viewed as visually intrusive, inappropriate, unsympathetic, and ultimately threatening.²⁴

These concerns also reflect another conflict within the field of landscape design, which pits art against science or, rather more specifically, traditional aesthetic design against the practicalities of ecology. As explained above, many landscape designers have seen their role as essentially that of an artist, creating iconic, visually beautiful landscapes that are preserved and imitated over the centuries. It is easy to see how this view can conflict with any idea of the landscape designer as a manager of functioning ecological systems, having a principle focus on energy conservation, practical activities and problem solving. Why should an artist – or the preservation of the work of an artist – be constrained by the science of climate change and the humdrum realities of biological processes?²⁵

But things must change. Although there has been very little research on the potential negative impacts of climate change on the cultural heritage,²⁶ it is already clear that historic designed landscapes are both past culprits and future victims of unsustainable practices. Climatic threats to historic English landscapes have been identified as the complete destruction of gardens through coastal retreat; loss of character as a result of the unsustainability of particular trees and planting schemes; extensive browning of parkland; subsidence, settlement and cracking of architectural features; difficulties in maintaining ornamental lakes and local water supplies; erosion and run-off. Plant material is particularly at risk, through wind damage, temperature changes, new pests and diseases, summer drought and winter flooding, problems in propagating native species that need cold to germinate, and complex changes in soil fertility levels.²⁷ Most solutions currently identified do not address the fundamental issue that we have designed and are trying to preserve unsustainable landscapes. Instead, they propose simply redoubling current, unsustainable interventions: the use of more potable water to irrigate parched lawns and exotic plants, for example, or the increased application of chemicals to deter new pests and diseases.

Yet there is some good news. New values are emerging, which challenge the idea of preserving a historic designed landscape as it was at a particular point in the past. This new way of thinking rejects the obsessive, unsustainable restoration of original details, recognising this as an ultimately unattainable quest for an accurate historical picture. Among landscape professionals, if not yet the wider public, we can discern an increasing acceptance that the authentic reproduction of historic landscapes is simply not possible: any restoration will always be a modern-day interpretation, even when seemingly blindly copied from original plans.²⁸ In the same way, Swedish archaeologist Cornelius Holtorf argues that the remains of ancient objects and cultural sites will always be viewed

and interpreted through the context of contemporary life and given present-day meanings specific to the culture and experiences of the viewer: they have no inherent authenticity or “pastness.” Indeed, the modern-day interpretation is all that matters: it is almost irrelevant whether the original artifact is preserved or not. In the public understanding of history, the interpretation of archaeological monuments takes its place alongside other parts of popular culture such as Hollywood films like *Ben Hur* or the theme parks of Las Vegas and Disneyland.²⁹

This focus on interpretation and experience over physical preservation may become increasingly important. Some experts stress that, given the threats of climate change, it will be unfeasible to preserve all historic designed landscapes, or to try to preserve anything forever³⁰ – and that some (maybe many) important landscapes will need to be documented and then abandoned.³¹

Thus, instead of preventing change, conservation is starting to be seen as assisting the management of inevitable change. Cultural history is a continuing story, and its diverse, significant elements might be retained and celebrated through time. Such a change in values will allow us to acknowledge all the history in a site, including tomorrow's.³² It is an acceptance of a more individual, complex view of landscapes, as eloquently described by the American writer Lucy Lippard: “Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person's life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there.”³³

Designers are thus to be involved less in erasing evidence of subsequent human activity on a historic designed site, and more in embracing that evidence, and indeed in adding further layers that will provide value for future generations.³⁴ The Duisburg-Nord park and the Fresh Kills landfill, both mentioned above, are post-industrial examples. In the traditional heritage field, however, it is an idea more common in theory as yet than in actual practice, but there are examples emerging: the UK conservation body English Heritage, for instance, commissioned a series of six “contemporary heritage gardens” to sit alongside existing historic buildings, in an explicit attempt to create the heritage of the future.

This shift, from preservation to continuity, is not to destroy or dismiss the importance of historic designed landscapes. It is to value them differently. The architect Juhani Pallasmaa rightly described landscapes and buildings as “the most important external manifestations of who and what we are ... transforming chaos into cosmos... making the course of time visible; stimulating imagination of the future.”³⁵ It is that link to the present and future that landscape designers and historians need better to forge for historic designed landscapes. The public must be helped to experience them in the

same way that influential humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan urges us to see museums – places which “preserve materials that mark the stages of confident growth and point to the future.”³⁶

In any event, the emerging conservationist view of history as a continuum must be good news for sustainability. It should in theory allow us to include within historic designed landscapes clear evidence of the early twenty-first century shift in values towards environmental protection and sustainability. We might yet see and learn to celebrate solar panels, greywater harvesting and reuse, on-site composting, native meadows and green roofs placed centre stage at some of our iconic historic designed landscapes.

But to succeed, I would argue that we need a new intellectual framework and radically different, collaborative action at a number of levels. First, landscape designers and historians need to accept that they must work as part of cross-disciplinary teams – crucially including climate scientists, environmental experts and ecologists, not as occasional advisors but as equal partners – so that changes to heritage landscapes really restore and sustain, rather than simply appearing to do so.³⁷ We need to move away from that tension between art and science, and accept that to manage historic designed landscapes sustainably requires both broad aesthetic judgments and detailed technical expertise. One cannot be allowed to trump the other, even for our most cherished and important landscapes.

Secondly, we need to redirect our design and conservation practices by forging a new, more collaborative relationship with nature, no longer seeing it as something static, visual and separate that we can manipulate at will. Rather we must recognise, as argued by Aldo Leopold and others, that humanity is simply a part of nature, and so our human communities fundamentally include the non-human elements that Leopold collectively called ‘the land’: waters, soils, plants and animals. Certainly, given today’s looming climatic and ecological challenges, we need to accept nature “as a dynamic, changing, and exchanging force field of ecological process in which humans are actively immersed and engaged.”³⁸

Finally, and perhaps most dramatically, designers and historians need to work with the public to reappraise why and how people value landscapes, what character and feeling they convey, what they say about our relationship with nature.³⁹ We need fundamentally to re-write landscape design history, and to rediscover the essential purpose and intent of designs, not simply to fixate upon their initial appearance. There is a continuum of meaning and value over the centuries that is today frequently only glimpsed. As Anne Whiston Spirn has urged, we need to rediscover the deep context underlying the surface of landscapes, to explore their settlement patterns, geological features, and the cultures and attitudes that have shaped them.⁴⁰

Such change cannot happen overnight. It will certainly, as Carleton B. Christensen argues in a different context,⁴¹ require new national and international guidelines to support and encourage the sustainable management of historic designed landscapes. But, despite Christensen's views, I would argue that we cannot simply wait for such formal frameworks. They will only emerge slowly, and at first, be tentative and much diluted by a desire to find consensus. While we wait for such top-down direction, we need to start pilot projects or demonstrations now: to encourage and sponsor local experimentation – a sustained civic exchange – with people considering their own local special places and how they can be adapted. People need to see, experience and experiment before they can accept the radical changes that will be necessary.⁴² I am not arguing for the stultifying public consultations of today which so often produce lowest common denominator results, which everybody accepts but nobody loves. Rather we need to look to successful models such as the so-called RSVP cycles of community involvement orchestrated by designer Lawrence Halprin, which replaced goal-driven designs for landscapes with an enduring creative process that allowed for continuing change and growth.⁴³

Similarly there is much merit in the approach advocated by Bill Jordan,⁴⁴ who seeks to reclaim and reinstate native habitats through ritual and communal human intervention, with the fundamental focus on getting processes to work – rather than the traditional method of using an expert to produce a seemingly complete end-product.

Another promising model is the continuous productive urban landscapes (CPULS) concept of André Viljoen and Katrin Bohn, which aims to bring together diverse experts, local leaders and community groups to create sustainable farms within cities.⁴⁵ It has been successfully piloted in the north of England and there are proposals for further trials in the Netherlands.

Involving both the scientific community and members of the public in pilot sustainability projects at historic designed landscapes is not to reject the importance of historical values or aesthetics. Nor is it recommending that humanity should be prevented from any apparent design interventions. Far from seeking to impose the equivalent of an ecological hair shirt on historic landscapes, active considerations of sustainability in a historic context should allow us to enjoy, design and value the landscape anew, as something joyous, sensuous, intimate, and profoundly relevant.⁴⁶ Such an approach is evocatively described by Native American writer N. Scott Momaday:

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from

as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk.⁴⁷

Working collaboratively, with scientists, with natural systems and with the public, designers and historians can bring about a fundamental shift in our relationships with historic designed landscapes: away from managing them as a static image of visual beauty and towards embracing them as a dynamic, evolving part of human culture, celebrating the vibrancy of history and looking forward to a sustainable future. Our cherished landscapes have the capacity to “become a ritual space for the human community to reestablish its ancient performative connection with the land.” We must act. By putting sustainability at the heart of landscape design history, we can find the way to a modern kind of Eden for us, and for the generations to come, a place where “we are both gardeners and part of the garden.”⁴⁸

Notes

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