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The Inhabited Landscape

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I was struck, in rereading the statements that accompanied, the projects submitted for consideration in “The Inhabited Landscape” exhibition, by a passage in Garrett Eckbo’s letter to Frances Halsband. He said that he believed that his own submissions reflected the theme of the exhibition:

I believe they all exemplify, in various ways, your concept, which has been a driving force in my work for fifty years, “the integration of architecture and the landscape . . . is absolutely central.” In actual practice this rarely happens through direct, one-time, equal base collaboration. Usually architecture/construction is there first, actually or conceptually. The landscape elements must adapt to, grow from, and extend the architectural/structural concepts (whether or not they seem to lend themselves to that), and establish connections or separations between the project and the surrounding neighborhood and region. The environment is littered with impossible tangles which have resulted from the absence of thought about this end product of each development project. The environmental art of the future will be kept busy trying to untangle such messes. The occasional one-to-one collaboration—I have had some—serves as guide and beacon.

Eckbo articulates here his impression of what the focus of this exhibition was to be, an impression that I shared but about which there

was some disagreement among the jury. He makes the point that historically the design of buildings most often literally *precedes*—and from that, *takes precedence over*—the design of the larger environment of which the buildings will ultimately be just a part. He clearly favors an alternative approach, in which considerations of the total site’s existing and potential character are addressed from the beginning of a design process that gives equal importance and priority to architectural and landscape values. This distinction is more profound than simply the question of who works with whom at the various stages of the project. Eckbo makes the point that in the right kind of design process the character of the site actually shapes the decisions that determine building form, instead of having to respond afterwards to the “architectural/structural concepts.” His reading of the criteria for the exhibition reflects my own original understanding, and I think the jury’s disagreement about the meaning of these criteria was hardly a minor matter, but rather a significant schism that must be taken into account in any effort to interpret the exhibition.

Perhaps my response to one of the projects will make clear what I see as a critical ambiguity in the selection process that has made it impossible for me to evaluate what the sum total of the projects chosen actually can tell us about contemporary approaches to the design of the “inhabited landscape.” Turner Brooks’s Sheldon

House in Vermont is useful in this way. Nothing in the architecture of this house seemed to me particularly responsive to the nature—big “N” or little “n”—of the Vermont sheep farm in which it is set, except perhaps that its wood-frame construction reflects a regional vernacular. On the contrary, Brook’s accompanying comments underscore the fact that his Vermont houses deliberately aim for the look of a “nervous” architecture that “always seems to be sliding across the landscape in the form of steamboats or some other form of vehicle.” A comment on his work that appeared in *Architectural Record* makes the point that “the hint of potential mobility” in such houses “reflects the nature of their inhabitants, many of whom are transplants from city or suburbia, or only part-time country folk.” How well the Sheldon House succeeds as architecture is not at issue here; its failure to accommodate its forms to the existing landscape, so that one has the sense that the house might have been built on another site in almost the same way, makes me question its viability as a model of building/landscape integration.

Another residential design, Antoine Predock’s Fuller House in the Sonoran desert of Arizona, offers a good example of a contrasting approach. Here the desert environment, the specific character of the *place*—its topography, geology, vegetation, climate, etc.—has determined the forms of the building, so that “the line of demarcation between the house and

the terrain becomes ambiguous.” The domestic activities to which the plan of the house responds are physically and symbolically merged with the surrounding natural and cultural world; one views the sunrise from a special pavilion above the breakfast room, the night lights of Phoenix from “the stepped exterior of the pyramidal den.” This house seeks to enter the desert reverently, mindful that what millenia of adaptive natural processes have produced is as vulnerable as it is precious. The aesthetic that shapes its forms is born out of a desire to make life *on* the desert participate in the life *of* the desert.

The two other residential landscapes in the exhibition provide a study in contrasts from another perspective: the Reed Garden by Eisenman Robertson Associates, and the series of courtyard gardens for Ceres Farm by Tori Thomas. The Reed Garden is unquestionably beautiful, but fails to move beyond or to transform in significant ways a *retardataire* style associated with the design of early twentieth-century estate gardens. Tori Thomas’s work, on the other hand, playfully manipulates historic styles and themes in a search for transformations that seem, in their freshness and vitality, to belong absolutely to the present,

although a present that admires and loves the past. That spirit, it seems to me, represents the best impulse of our benighted Post-Modernism.

Several of the projects in the exhibition demonstrate a keen sensitivity to the fact that the history of a site often becomes one of the most important of the landscape “givens” that new design must address. The Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Waste Water Treatment Plant (Centerbrook Architects) offers a model for introducing high-tech, industrial processes into a visually and ecologically fragile landscape *harmlessly*, in the best sense of that word. Jones & Jones’s Gene Coulon Beach Park is similarly modest in its approach to creating a public park on a mile of Lake Washington waterfront that had been an industrial site. The design draws upon the vernacular building tradition of mills, shipping and storage facilities and reminds us of the history of the place without lapsing into quaintness or gimmickry. I very much like the way that it celebrates the plain virtues of a vanished landscape of work. Finally, Hanna/Olin’s “The Meadows” for the ARCO Chemical Company introduces a corporate headquarters into a site that included the remains of a private school campus in the English

“landscape park” tradition. There is sympathy for that past in the design, but there are elements of unconventional departures as well. I liked the way that the building was made to wrap around a court of large trees—too close and overwhelming for the low building to accommodate picturesque distancing in space, so that the canopy trees and lawn are liberated, in a sense, to work as metaphors.

Two projects in the exhibition seem particularly strong examples of architecture/landscape integration: Antoine Predock’s Rio Grande Nature Center and Fay Jones and Maurice Jenning’s Thorncrown Chapel. It is impossible to judge whether these buildings succeed in all the ways that architecture must succeed—we do not know a thing, for example, about how the interior plan of Predock’s building meets programmatic needs, if it is aesthetically satisfying, etc. But it does seem clear that the design of these two buildings drew from the very first, as Eckbo urged, upon the nature of the site—recognizing the essential principle that each individual site is unique—and then sought somehow to express that engagement with the total landscape through the language of architectural form.