Title

Architecture and Landscape: Three Modes of Relationship   [The Inhabited Landscape: An Exhibition]

Author

Rainey, Reuben M.

Architecture and Landscape: Three Modes of Relationship

Reuben M. Rainey

The fit between architecture and the land is a perennial issue since architecture in its broadest sense includes indoor *and* outdoor space, buildings *and* parks, plazas *and* parkways. A given landscape confronts the designer with a vast array of constraints and opportunities that must be addressed with clarity and decisiveness if architectural work is to respond successfully to basic human needs and embody fundamental cultural values. The history of architecture and landscape architecture reveals three basic modes of relationship between architecture and the landscape: *contrast, merger,* and *reciprocity.*[1] Seldom does any of the modes appear in pure form, but one is usually predominant in combination with one or both of the others. The contrasts, tensions, and ambiguities brought about by combining these various modes not only enhance the appearance of a work but also allow it to embody a rich complexity of meaning. All three modes rest in large part on basic convictions about the proper relationship of human beings to "nature," which has been defined in a multitude of ways throughout the history of design.

Contrast juxtaposes architecture with the natural or cultural landscape. A typical strategy sets a building against a relatively untouched swath of the natural environment. The building's scale, profile, color and materials act in concert to create a powerful counterpoint to its immediate setting. There are no transitional gardens or terraces to act as a bridge, so the resulting contrast between building and landscape accentuates the intrinsic qualities of each. Contrast is often employed by designers who understand nature as a realm apart, with its own processes, ecosystems and visual characteristics that differ from works of art. Yet others who employ the same strategy would challenge this point of view and claim, after the manner of Dan Kiley, that "man is nature" and that all works of human artifice, regardless of their visual contrasts with their surrounding landscape, are expressions of "nature" in the form of human creativity.[2]

A classic example of contrast was the original nineteenth-century design of New York's Central Park, whose sequences of pastoral and picturesque scenery constituted a totally different environment from the surrounding urban grid. The whole was to provide an experience of nature understood in Ruskinian and Emersonian terms that relieved urban stress and nurtured the moral well-being of the city's inhabitants. More recent examples of park design, such as George Hargreaves Associates' Fiddlers Green Amphitheatre near Denver, Colorado, depart from the nineteenth-century tradition of the picturesque park yet employ a similar strategy of contrast with their surrounding cultural and natural landscapes. Hargreaves' earth amphitheatre is strongly reminiscent of Classical Greek prototypes. When not serving as a theatre for the performing arts, a slope for sledding or a picnic site, it functions as a powerful piece of environmental sculpture. As such, it forms a counterpoint to the panoramic view of the Rocky Mountains, which serves as its stage backdrop, as well as to the freestanding office buildings adjacent to it. However, the amphitheatre does not merely contrast with its immediate setting. The form of its base also echoes the linear forms of the step mesa foothills of the distant Rockies, and its walkway bands are constructed of the local red sandstone.

Merger is the polar opposite of contrast. Here a building is made to appear an integral part of its natural or cultural landscape. In a natural landscape, the form of the building may reflect the surrounding topography or, in extreme cases, be placed underground so as not to be visible. Merger in a pure mode is never possible in a natural landscape because the very act of building obviously introduces an element of contrast. In an urban setting, where built form predominates, merger is more readily achievable since one need only echo or interpret the surrounding architecture. Often the view of nature that informs merger understands nature as a transcendent power that transforms human existence or evokes a sense of deep feeling states in the psyche. Or it can imply a rational, scientific attitude toward nature as a complex realm of processes that humans must respect and adapt to if they are to survive on this planet. In this sense, merger is emblematic of humanity's capacity for harmonious adjustment, or design with nature.

Much of Frank Lloyd Wright's work, especially Fallingwater and Taliesen West, provide classic examples of merger in the American tradition, although Wright blends powerful elements of contrast in his design strategy as well. Fay Jones and Associates' Thorncrown Chapel stands firmly in the Wrightian tradition by formally recalling the forest in which it is set. Its wood structure has been hand-rubbed with grayish stain to blend with the bark of the surrounding trees. The roof beams form a canopy reminiscent of the forest, reminding us of Ruskin's observation that being in a Gothic church is like being in a great, verdant wood. Yet in the precision and intricacy of its structure and the color and materials of its interior furnishings, the building also stands in counterpoint to the setting. Richard Haag employs the strategy of merger in his use of a natural bog as an "anteroom" in the rich sequence of highly varied garden spaces in the Bloedel Reserve. Except for the clearing of some underbrush and the introduction of mosses and ferns to highlight the massive stumps of 700-year-old trees, the bog is relatively unaltered. It is intended to evoke, through its strong aroma of decay, spongy soil, dim light and gnarled remnants of former giants of the forest, "the rapture of the deep" and a sense of the transciency of all living things.

Fiddlers Green Amphitheater, Denver, Colorado, George Hargreaves Associates

5

Reciprocity is the most frequently employed of the three strategies. In it, buildings and landscape modify one another—each one to some degree is reflected in the other. Building plan may be projected quite literally into the immediately adjacent landscape; or, more subtly, indoor and outdoor spaces may share the same organizing principles, expressed in such architectonic elements as terraces, pergolas, walls, arcades, pools, fountains and plants. A zone of transition may interlock or penetrate the plan of the building itself. It may also form a series of outdoor spaces that, in close proximity to the building, mirror its plan or facade but gradually undergo spacial and material transformations along a central axis until they merge with the surrounding natural landscape.

The formal strategies of this mode are among the richest and most diverse in the history of architecture and landscape architecture. They include Ligorio's brilliant sixteenth-century Villa d'Este, with its planar spaces arrayed along axes marked by fountains, and Capability Brown's great park at Petworth characterized by its immense lawn and serpentine lake bounded by undulating edges of deciduous trees. The strong American preference for siting private houses, colleges and corporate headquarters in vast pastoral landscapes is an expression of this reciprocity. Hanna Olin's site plan for ARCO Chemical Company's Research and Engineering Center in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania, preserves the English park landscape of a

former private school, augments it with additional trees and utilizes it in the visitors' entry sequence. The project successfully sites a high technology, semi-industrial complex in a "genteel, bucolic setting," with a 300-year-old tradition of design precedent. By far the majority of works in "The Inhabited Landscape" exhibition manifest a similar strategy, but with a wide range of formal expression.

The views of nature that inform reciprocity are as varied as the formal strategies used to express it: Nature as a realm admired for its order and regularity, which can be perceived by human intelligence, partaking of that same order (the Papal Residence and Garden at Pienza); nature as a province to be controlled and manipulated by political or religious authority (Versailles); nature as an ideal pastoral landscape embodying the ideals of a normative Classical civilization (Stourhead) and nature as raw material to be used in the expression of human art (Villa Lante). These are but a few of the diverse concepts that underlie this approach.

One of the most interesting aspects of the present scene in architecture and landscape architecture is the wide variety of formal strategies within these three basic modes of contrast, merger and reciprocity. Some designers may opt to restate or interpret a historic architectural tradition that first appeared in a sixteenth-century Italian villa or an eighteenth-century English country house. Others may adopt formal approaches derived from twentieth-

century avant-garde painting—from collage, from de Stijl asymmetry or from Cubist fragmentation.[3]

Again, though, the precise mode a designer uses in fitting a building to the land or a park to its urban context is largely determined by an explicit or implicit view of the proper relationship between human beings and nature, a view that ultimately rests upon the values of the designer. Design is, in essence, the giving of form to values.

Notes

1 Two of the most comprehensive and lucid discussions of the possible relationships of buildings to landscape are Charles Moore, Gerald Allen, and Donlyn Lyndon, *The Place of Houses* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974) and Robert Geddes, "The Nature of the Built Environment," *Progressive Architecture* Volume 55, Number 6 (June 1974), pp. 72–81. I am deeply indebted to both of these works, as well as to discussions with my colleagues Warren Byrd, Harry Porter, William Rieley, Laurie Olin, and Marc Treib.

2 See, for example, Warren T. Byrd and Reuben M. Rainey, eds., *The Work of Dan Kiley: A Dialogue on Design Theory* (Charlottesville, Virginia: Division of Landscape Architecture, University of Virginia, 1983) p. 14; or Dan Kiley, "My Design Process," *Process: Architecture*, 33: "Landscape Design: Works of Dan Kiley," p. 15.

3 For a brief, but incisive, discussion of some current formal strategies of landscape architecture, with specific reference to garden design, see Laurie Olin, "12 Brillig and Contrary Gardens," *Places: A Quarterly Journal of Environmental Design*, Volume 3, Number 3, pp. 52–55.