

# What is landscape architecture about?

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### *A contextual discipline*

Landscape architecture is a contextual discipline. When looking at a problem from a landscape architecture point of view, there is rarely one single right answer to any question. The answers are always depending on several factors, which all may change. When a certain factor changes it may influence the answers directly, as well as indirectly, as it may influence the way the other factors are considered.

One example: in Studley Royal, near York in England, there is an old monastery ruin of great magnitude and importance; the Fountains Abbey. Thirteen Benedictine monks seeking a simpler life after leaving St. Mary's Abbey in York founded the Abbey, Britain's largest monastic ruin, in 1132. They later became Cistercian monks. Archaeologists have documented a rich source for the understanding of 12th–15th century life in the Abbey, which now is a World Heritage Site, and plans have been set up to establish it as an interpretive centre. In the 18th century, after many years of neglect and decay, the place was included as a point-de-vue in the Studley Royal landscape garden by William Aislabie in 1761 [1]. In 1983, the area became the property of National Trust, and they undertook an extensive rehabilitation. By that time, the gardens were in ruins, and a rich biological diversity in flora and fauna was discovered, and the place is of geological interest, due to some special limestone rock formations. The three interest groups: the archaeologists, the landscape garden lovers and the ecologists represented conflicting views concerning the focus and degree of restoration and preservation. The landscape architects in National Trust had to balance these views when deciding on the restoration plans. Discovery of a red-list species or an archaeological sensation even bigger than the actual one might have resulted in something else than today's park with an emphasis on the 18th century landscape garden.

### **The theory of practice**

Landscape architecture theory is therefore depending on the practice of landscape architecture and its neighbouring disciplines. It is tempting to say that there is no separate or independent theory of landscape architecture, it is only leaning on other disciplines' theories, and indeed this viewpoint has been taken in the discussion, most prominently by

John Dixon Hunt in his book: *Greater Perfection: the practice of garden theory* [4]. Hunt's statement is surely a polemic or provocative contribution, nevertheless, it is clear that most scholars within the discipline today agree that there is a strong need to develop landscape architecture theory further [2]. During the last two to three decades, this has been a big issue in the academic journals, especially in JoLA, Landscape Journal and Landscape and Urban Planning.

However, what should a theory of landscape architecture be like, what should it be concerned with? It must of course be concerned with the development and role of the fundamental concepts and ideas that lie behind the discipline of landscape architecture, and their transformation into workable techniques. It must focus on the place of landscape architecture in the wider scheme of ideas and theories, which attempt to explain, interpret and guide humankind's activities. Landscape history presents a set of ideas that attempts to explain and interpret mankind's activities, and may thus be seen as a part of landscape theory, like several other bits and pieces from ecology, geography, archaeology etc etc.

### **The origin of the profession**

The development of landscape architecture theory is also a part of its history. Early in the 20th century landscape architecture was mainly a profession, not an academic discipline. The first study programme at graduate level was established at Harvard University in March 1900. So for once, the "New World" has an older academic history than Europe. The first course in Europe above the "fachhochschule-level" that had existed in Germany and several other countries as well since early 19th century, [6] was, surprisingly, established at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences in 1919. Berlin was established in 1929, Lisbon in 1941 and Wageningen in 1947 [5]. Only during the last 2 – 3 decades has the number of schools at this level been established in the broader European context. Therefore, the history and theory of landscape architecture are intertwined, and we shall look at a few examples of how.

In 1779, 50 years before the term 'landscape architecture' was invented, Christian Cay Laurenz Hirschfeld, a Danish professor of philosophy in Kiel,



Fig. 1. Akkarvikodden resting place designed by Inge Dahlman demonstrates a land art approach to landscape design  
[Source: photo Steinar Skaar]



Fig. 2. Birkenhead Park in Liverpool designed by Joseph Paxton in the 1840ies  
[Source: photo from author private archive]



Fig. 4. New York Central Park Christo and Jeanne  
[Source: photo from author private archive]



Fig. 3. Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire England a part of Studley Royal designed by John Aislabe  
[Source: photo from author private archive]



Fig. 5. The Nidaros Cathedral Plaza in Trondheim designed by Bjarne Aasen  
[Source: Bjarne Aasen]





Fig. 6. Part of The Oslo University Campus designed by Bjarne Aasen [Source: Bjarne Aasen]

published his “*Teorie der Gartenkunst*” [3]. This happened almost simultaneously with the publication of Horace Walpole’s famous essay “*On Gardening*” where he developed the idea of the history of garden art culminating inevitably with the English landscape garden style. Hirschfeld described examples of garden art from different points of view, and explained how the Art of Gardening had developed through the ages. His contribution to “theory” consisted mainly of an historical review.

In one small section of the book, he also describes what he calls “*Volksgärten*” - ‘People’s Gardens’. According to Hirschfeld, this type of garden or park is found in major cities, often called public promenades. It is a place of great natural beauty, there are walkways, roads for carriages and benches for people, where they can sit and admire the scenery. This was obviously a very timely observation, for during the next few decades ‘*Volksgärten*’ popped up in almost every major city in Europe. It is not easy to tell who was first, because it will be a matter of definitions, nuances and interpretations of history. Many regard Birkenhead Park in Liverpool, designed by Joseph Paxton, built in 1843, to be the first public park. However, the main city park, Varosliget in Budapest, was established thirty years earlier, designed by Heinrich Nebbien after a competition in

1813 [1]. In Germany, the ‘*Englischer Garten*’ designed by Friedrich Ludwig von Sckell in Munich, is by many regarded as the first [8]. The garden was opened to the public in 1789, by order of the new regent in Bavaria Karl Theodor. The grounds where the Englischer Garten was established were, however, former royal property, and examples of royal property with a degree of public access had been known long before this date, e.g. in Hyde Park, where the hunting grounds were opened to the public on certain instances from 1635 by Charles I. Even Louis XIV occasionally opened the grounds of Versailles to the public.

At least there seems to be a consensus that Hirschfeld was “among the most eloquent of those pressing for the creation of public parks”. And that Englischer Garten in Munich, designed purposely as a public park, in the year of the French Revolution, is a good representative of the park movement that spread all over Europe within the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century [10].

In America Frederick Law Olmsted joined the debate on establishment of public parks after he returned from a six months travel to England. He was very impressed by Joseph Paxton’s Birkenhead Park, and reported back: “in democratic America there was nothing to be thought of as comparable with this People’s Garden!” [7].



Fig. 7. The Norwegian University of Life Sciences where the garden architecture study programme  
[Source: photo from author private archive]



Fig. 8. The Royal Palace Park Oslo dedicated to be a public park with access for all  
[Source: photo from author private archive]

Olmsted visited Europe several times, also after he won the competition for the design of Central Park together with Calvert Vaux in 1958. They established their careers as landscape architects, being among the first to use this term. In Olmsted's terminology, landscape architecture described a special type of scenery, set amongst buildings. Central Park was the first great example of Olmsted's art. Next, Olmsted planned a great series of parks in Boston. His work was greatly admired in Europe [9].

In 1903 two Europeans used the same term in connection with a competition for the design of Pittencrieff Park in Dunfermline: Patrick Geddes and Thomas Mawson. Patrick Geddes was a great admirer of Olmsted, and expressed very clearly the strong link between garden design, public parks and town planning. Later, Geddes and Mawson became founder members of the British Town Planning Institute and in 1929 Mawson became first president

of the Institute of Landscape Architects, now the Landscape Institute. Geddes comes back to this link in several of his books, e.g. *Cities in evolution*, one of the most influential planning books of the twentieth century. The book contributed to today's predominant view of what landscape architecture is: the art of making good places and environments for ordinary people [11].

### Landscape architecture is space making

The aim of garden design, as of landscape planning, is to make good outdoor space. This requires us to understand the *nature of the world*. One must appreciate *what* can be changed and *how* it can be changed. There is no one right way. Approaches to understanding the nature of place, through art, science and cultural studies, yield different views of outdoor space: of how it can be moulded and of the degree to which it should remain unchanged.

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