global art
Planet Photoshop

by Richard Weller (US)

Every year, I review many design books from all over the world by undergraduate landscape architecture students applying for graduate study in the United States. Although it is a generalization and thus not always the case, it is fair to say that the design work by these students looks remarkably similar. The same representational techniques take the place of landscapes, populated with the same kind of people.

Welcome ‘to planet Photoshop!’

My concerns with this homogeneity are two-fold. The first is a question of the lack of criticality in contemporary landscape architecture; the second is a question of originality and individuality.

Taken as a whole, the field typically expresses the same big idea: namely that modernity - despite all evidence to the contrary - can become an ecological paradise and landscape architects can make this happen. This evocative notion is expressed primarily through carefully choreographed images of beauty, happy people immersed in pristine, naturalistic landscapes. Indeed, if the images are to be believed much of the world is becoming a utopia and is truly sustainable.

I don’t get me wrong; the project of converting cities from mechanistic to ecological systems is surely the primary design challenge for the 21st century but this does not automatically mean the production of images of a kind
paradise. Of course, there are instances where new landscapes can and should evolve toward the form and function of pre-anthropogenic ecosystems, but generally speaking we work in irreversibly altered, toxic, chaotic urban conditions where eco-paradise as-advertised is specious.

Whilst on the surface of it, images of eco-paradise seem perfectly innocent and render all those involved in their production virtuous, they are not so simple. The bliss they promise is, like the original paradise itself, ahistorical and apolitical. By disguising their machinic origins and filling up urban space with a return-to-nature, eco-paradisiacal images foreclose the possibility of aesthetic invention and, by extension, the possibility of any socio-political programs other than passive observation. Indeed, as if to give the whole game away, it is not uncommon for the joyous citizens of planet photoshop to themselves be pictured taking photos of the very landscape they themselves have been flattened into. Just as sex sells objects, nature now sells urbanism but this nature is what music is to music, an insult to art.

In my school, however, romantic it may be, we still encourage and shape our curriculum around the idea of originality, more commonly expressed as ‘innovation’. Although the idea of the designer as a revolutionary artist has been debunked by post-modernism we still place a premium on the designer’s ability to try and make something newish. We place a premium on a designer’s ability to critically interpret precedent and relate it to contemporary cultural conditions. In other words, aesthetic judgment is predicated on the degree of difference between the original and the copy, not the degree of verisimilitude.

Which leads to my second concern: the lack of apparent individuality and originality in the folios I receive.

Without exaggerating individuality, (since there is far more that we have in common than sets us apart), designers need nonetheless to cultivate their own world-view as best they can. The reason for this is to avoid the slavish mass-production of ideology, which as history repeatedly teaches can have disastrous social and ecological consequences.

In China, Kongjian Yu is an outstanding role model in this regard. He has studied both western precedents and Chinese agrarian traditions and from these he has developed his own critical approach to modernity and his own related landscape aesthetic. It matters not whether he is right or wrong: what matters is that Yu has a clear theoretical and practical position and that we can then discuss this position and measure our own work against it. If, for example, you were to choose Yu’s work as a precedent for your own, you should then be able to answer why you are making this selection. Your obligation as a thinking designer is to critically understand the original before you simply reproduce it. You must also be able to show and explain how your interpretation alters, extends or in some way develops the precedent. This is what it means to make an intelligent, creative and critical contribution to the discipline, to the profession and, at best, to culture at large.

As well as submitting design folios every applicant for graduate study also writes a personal statement. Like the folios these letters are very similar. Most of the Chinese students for example, refer to their childhood in a village and how rapid development has changed everything. They then say how they want to solve China’s environmental and social problems with landscape architecture. This is understandable for a generation that has experienced traumatic change, but what the students (and their teachers) need to ask is how this trauma translates into their design work and how this design work is then really engaging with the forces of modernity that drive change.

From all the heartfelt letters I received this year, two stood out from the rest. In the first, the student began his letter by saying “I don’t care about old China and I don’t want to make designs like Kongjian Yu”! The second opened by saying she disagreed with Rem Koolhaas’ apparent acceptance of the ‘Generic city’ as the dominant form of contemporary urbanism and went on to describe an alternative approach. Irrespective of whether we agree or disagree with these two quite different points of view, because these two applicants had the courage to take a first step toward a critical and individual position, they went to the top of my list.

Global landscape architecture desperately needs designers who are willing to take intellectual and creative risks based upon a critical appreciation of precedent. Landscape architecture needs people who can seriously think about the fundamental paradox that our work is made possible by forces that we also need to resist and redirect. Landscape architecture needs people who are not passive consumers and producers of scenery for planet photoshop!

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