

**ON THE SUBLIME FOUNDATIONS OF BEAUTY AND AN
AESTHETIC OF ENGAGEMENT FOR PLANTING DESIGN IN
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE**

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Abstract

Landscape architecture has its roots in the history of connections between people and plants yet planting design within contemporary practice has become constricted in antiquated aesthetic theories. Formalism developed in the 18th century as landscape gardening was influenced by painters focusing on a newfound interest in wilderness. However when translated to the design of landscapes, formalism is inappropriately founded in the tools of the painter, namely a visual focus on formal features. Yet landscapes are not paintings and the experience is much more complex.

This thesis proposes the correct appreciation of planting design is an aesthetic of engagement founded on interaction with the sublime in nature, effectively expanding the visio-centric archetypal constraints of formalism. Plants are the “manifestation of living reality”. They embody an essence that transcends classical beauty and cannot be completely described through the mono-syllabic language of formalism. Planting design seeks to engender an experience of landscape, an experience necessarily understood phenomenologically. What has previously been seen as visually remote composition of plants instead becomes a series of events, sequences of engagements or encounters with the sublime.

The aesthetic of engagement in planting design is articulated in four ways. Direct engagement is found in moments of focused attention on individual plants which emanate their presence through sculptural experience. Indirect engagement occurs when plants are not the center of attention but subserviently frame captivating moments in the landscape. Ethical engagement is pleasure gained through knowledge of the healing power of ecologically sensitive or remedial planting designs on the land. In the reverse direction, the healing power of plants on people results in therapeutic engagement from working directly with plants such as instances of gardening, horticultural therapy, or community agriculture.

Examples found in contemporary built projects verify this trend towards landscapes of engagement as present attention of practitioners turns to designing with the intangible beauty of plants. This thesis fills a gap in knowledge by providing a philosophical conceptualization of the aesthetics of planting design and language through which to carry on dialogue over its presence. Although formalism is used to clarify aspects of plants, these four practices of aesthetic engagement constitute a more inclusive understanding of the beauty found in planting design.

Acknowledgements

This thesis has its origins in the history of my education. As an undergraduate in horticulture at North Carolina State University, I was introduced to the magic of plants and their ability to affect an individual. In my graduate education, both at the Rhode Island School of Design and Ball State University, I became aware of how poorly understood the aesthetics of planting design was within landscape architecture. But it wasn't until I was assistant teaching a planting design studio that I realized the gravity of this effect. When a student asked me what makes planting design beautiful, I was at a loss of words to describe what had up to this point been captive in my intuition and turned to the literature for inspiration. It is here that the infection of an empirical society came forefront, where almost all discussion of planting design remained constrained by the limited language of formalism. Though the physical features of plants were undeniably true, I felt they brought a beauty to the landscape beyond their formal features, thus set out on a quest to uncover it.

There are certain individuals who have been instrumental to my progress along the way. Malcolm Cairns put me in a position to realize my potential within the profession in an effectual way; all other progress rests on the shoulders of his confidence in me. Rob Benson showed there was room for intelligible discussion

on planting design within the profession and I shall cherish always our conversations. German Cruz imbued upon me the confidence to tackle philosophy, though I doubt he realizes this in actuality. Kenton Hall provided much needed outside influence. Other scholars and their thoughts have been of inestimable inspiration, but I must note Elizabeth Meyer as possibly the most influential landscape theorist; I am deeply appreciative of her willingness to take time and meet with me on several occasions.

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Chapter 1: An Introduction

What are we Afraid of?

Douglas Tallamy once drew an illuminating comparison between the typical suburban lawn and an eastern deciduous forest¹. The open expanse of turf grass sprinkled with dutifully maintained ornamental shrubbery remains a visually controlled landscape; it limits the palate of sensuous experience. In contrast, the typical eastern deciduous forest is a decidedly haptic experience with an incomprehensible variety of elements vying for attention (Figure 1.1). Of course there are physical manifestations of objects to be seen, but they are inseparable from synaesthetic character of forest experience. The warmth of dappled sunshine, cooling touch of a wind's sweet breeze, the enchanting call of birds invisibly present, all add to the sensuous experience of being in nature. Yet this is a complex environment, one likely impossible to define, thus it seems most Americans have limited nature to a groomed lawn with clipped hedges and empty

¹ From a Keynote presentation at the 28th Annual Central Virginia Landscape Management Seminar. February 10, 2011

pots which hit at a yearning for something more. To this end Tallamy asks “what are we afraid of”?



Figure 1.1: Aesthetic Engagement of a forest. (Image © Nicholas Serrano 2011)

This hits at the heart of mainstream landscapes in two ways, both in the conception of how one perceives and their reaction to plants. In asking what one is afraid of, Tallamy jokingly hits on a core response when presented with the incomprehensible complexity of nature, that of sublimity. The resulting highly controlled landscapes, typified in the suburban front lawn, are a defensive reaction to this sublime aspect; a way for people to organize their daily environment in an easily comprehensible fashion. This is evident in the work of numerous cultural geographers such as J.B. Jackson, Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, Kevin Lynch , and Jay Appleton.

In the contrasting eastern deciduous forest one sees an actual experience of nature is far more multisensory than how most practitioners design or talk

about landscape. The forest is not merely looked at but one feels himself in it. The connection between perceiver and landscape is much more complex than patron and painting for nature offers itself up in a multifaceted model. Yet the thinking self finds it difficult to separate and control numerous variables thus finds itself designing a limited landscape.

Both factors -landscape perception and sublimity- are crucial to an appropriate aesthetic of planting design in the contemporary landscape. Opening to the full experience of nature risks an overwhelmingly sublime experience yet is the only way to understand the true beauty of plants. Greater understanding of the sublime beauty informs necessary experiences, which then inform planting compositions. The process is self perpetuating.

Background

Landscape architecture has roots in the intimate connection between people and plants. Ever since the Neolithic revolution when man became an agriculturalist, people have depended on plants and shaped their environment with them. It seems curious then that within the past 100 year planting design, the aspect of professional landscape architecture that deals directly with the role of plants in designed landscapes, has come under somewhat bad light within the profession.

Planting design within landscape architecture has maintained a somewhat volatile role. In early American practice of Beau Arts classicism it was central, if of a somewhat limited palate, to the creation of beautiful gardens. The modernist response to increasing industrialization and post-war influx of housing

needs took the profession in a large scale direction beyond the attention to plants at the detailed level. The environmental movement and rediscovery of the garden in the 80's welcomed a renewed appreciation of plants, but of mixed values split between environmental, social, and aesthetic concern (Kearney, 2005). Often it seems the latter suffered domination by the other two.

Despite whatever advances have been made in the past 30 years, it seems landscape architects remain somewhat divorced from plants (Thompson, 2004). Many of the best practitioners will note the importance of aesthetic dialogue as the “recognition of art is fundamental to, and a precondition of, landscape design” (Meyer, 2008, p. 17), yet the discussion of such is “still hampered by the limited language of formal and informal” (p. 15). Planting design within the profession is either “most neglected or most scorned” (Byrd, 1999, p. 92), in many ways connotating “insipid ornamentation of landscape” (Morrison, 1999, p. 92) that has sunk to “perfunctory level[s]—that of ‘doing planting plans’”². This last statement is particularly illuminating to the role planting design plays in practice. Often it is relegated to construction documentation after conceptual and schematic design, after the stages which have the most influential effect on how the project develops. In this position it tends to defend design decisions, acting almost like puzzle pieces that fit within the context of an already designed landscape. For however much interest in planting design has fluctuated within the most recent

² Many quotes are used here to pull from the ideas of other, giving the central claim validity within professional practice, to make up for the authors lack of experience.

decade³, “planting is persistently relegated to a decorative auxiliary role” (Eckbo, 1969, p. 152)

The specific neglect of or lagging attention to planting design in landscape architecture is in direct opposition to the very the body of work idolized through such honors as annual ASLA awards and coverage in professional journals. Most projects that garner wide attention exhibit intricate attention to detail in the plantings used or how those plantings serve to create a specific atmosphere. Further, almost all historically significant landscape architects were first and foremost ingenious plantspeople. This suggests that despite a surficial disregard for planting design, the profession maintains an underlying affinity for it.

How is one to resolve this foundational appreciation for beautiful planting designs with its disregard in practice? How are practitioners so lauding of projects and designers that exhibit exemplary plantings yet give it such little credence in their own work? Garrett Eckbo possibly explains it best by noting how planting design “is a by-product..under pressure from our lingering poetic conscience, [that] recognize[s] the necessity of leaving some...space for planting. This grudging acquiescence to a poetic pressure that is tolerated but not understood reduces planting to a minor decorative role” (Eckbo, 1969, p. 151).

Chapter Overview

The present treatment of planting design⁴ is through a formalist aesthetic which posits the aspects most pertinent to appreciation are those features

³ Based on trends in professional awards of the American Society of Landscape Architects

(usually physical) which constitute the form of an object (Carlson, 1979b).

Formalism developed when painters started focusing on landscapes as their subject, attempting to evoke a sublime wilderness previously neglected due to civilizations' constant battle to exist against the threat of nature (Chapter 2). By capturing wilderness with a frame, artists literally reframed peoples' perspective on landscapes in good and bad ways.

To the positive, artists influenced people to take greater notice of wilderness by featuring it in their paintings, producing prospects of great appeal that in turn caused people to actively seek them out in their travels. It was perhaps on the Grand Tour the first "scenic overlooks" were established (Johnson, 1979). This new view of nature as source of inspiration provided fresh ideas to the design of built lands, revolutionizing the landscape gardening movement in England and bridging to the modern era of landscape architecture (Jellicoe, 1975).

Yet because appreciation of wilderness leaped from painting to landscape, people learned to use the conventions of painting to shape their understanding of landscape. The most consequential of these was a focus on the visual characteristics of formal features almost to the exclusion of smell, sound, and haptic perceptions. But landscape is not painting. One does not perceive solely through vision. Formalism is not a total understanding of landscape experience.

⁴ As evident in most textbooks on the subject

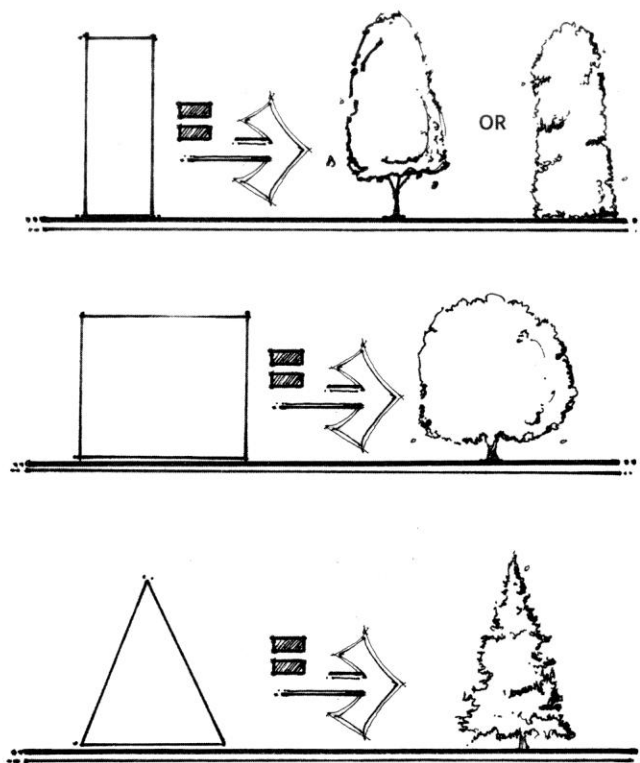


Figure 5.1
The various shapes of different plant types can be simplified into an abstract massing block.

Figure 1.2: Formalism is used as the main way to see planting design. (Image © Scott Scarfone 2007)⁵

Thus formalism provides an incomplete at best, or worse a falsely founded basis for the appreciation of landscape. By being the initial and unfortunately overly simplistic lens it is has become inappropriately applied to the aesthetic of planting design (Figure 1.2). It permeates through contemporary culture, shaping the teaching of visio-centric design in both architecture and landscape architecture in much the same way it spread in the 18th century. This is possibly best exemplified in Visual Landscape Assessments (VLA) or Visual

⁵ Professional Planting Design [Book]. Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

Quality Assessment which is the main (and in many cases only) quantitative treatment of aesthetics in scholarly discourse.

Landscape painters cannot be taken to complete fault for formalism in their focus on wilderness at the turn of the 18th century; formal features are what painters have at their disposal for artistic expression⁶. It is important to remember their interest was not in wilderness itself, rather how it evoked a sense of the sublime. It is here that this thesis posits that the correct foundation for the aesthetics of plants can be found in the pre-formalistic origins of the sublime beauty of nature (Chapter 3).

Whereas classical beauty is usually found in artifacts of culture, the sublime describes accounts of beauty that cannot be conceptualized in their entirety, where understanding fails to account for a beauty undeniably present. Formal features of plants are but a physical guise to the essence of their nature and formalism is a language of classicism that distracts aesthetic dialogue. What is needed is an aesthetic language and discourse for landscape architecture that focuses on the intangible in nature.

To account for the metaphysical in sublime beauty, an appropriate aesthetic breaks the bounds of formal rules or aspects by necessarily incorporating an embodied (i.e. phenomenological) reaction. This is in stark contrast to formalism that uses only the eyes and sees beauty inherit in an object by focusing on how it emerges in the visual experience. What is important are not accounts of but encounters with the sublime.

⁶ Chapter 3 will develop a distinction with the avant garde

Application of the sublime in professional practice is structured similar to existing present understanding of formalism, through perception. Yet whereas the latter focuses on vision, an aesthetic founded in sublime encounters needs to encompass the totality of experience. This recognizes that environment is understood phenomenologically, perceived simultaneously by all sense in relation to the body as center of measurement. The sublime is so great in effect it exceeds all faculties of mind and its sensory reception is equally as rich.

This thesis proposes an aesthetic of engagement as one way of understanding how to design with the sublime of plants. Adapted from the philosophy of Arnold Berleant, engagement appropriately balances features of both plants and perceiver to create an aesthetic rooted in experience from which the sublime emerges. It sets up a structure through which designers can map out plantings as a series of events experienced as one inhabits the environment.

The aesthetic of engagement in planting design is articulated in four ways. Direct engagement is found in moments of focused attention on individual plants which emanate their presence through sculptural experience. Indirect engagement occurs when plants are not the center of attention but subserviently frame captivating moments in the landscape. Ethical engagement is pleasure gained through knowledge of ecologically sensitive or remedial planting designs. Therapeutic engagement results from working directly with plants such as instances of gardening, horticultural therapy, or community agriculture. Examples from built projects are used to illustrate the manifestation of these principles in professional practice. Although formalism is used to clarify aspects

of plants, these four practices of aesthetic engagement constitute a more inclusive understanding of the beauty found in planting design.

Chapter 2: The Formalist Tradition



Figure 2.1: The Orangerie at the gardens of Versailles. (Image © Nicholas Serrano 2011)

At the risk of oversimplification, it can be noted that planting design in landscape architecture began largely in an effort to provide architecture to the outdoor environment, both through spatial formation and decorative ornament. Its earliest uses, such as at the Court of Myrtles at La Alhambra, were simplistic and straightforward in how plants translated the dialogue of architecture to animate material. Knot and parterre gardens of the Middle Ages plantings

developed increasing complexity alongside the sculptural uses of topiary. Yet it wasn't until the Italian Mannerist and French gardens that plants took on the main role of outdoor spatial formation from architecture, transcribing stone walls into *charmille* and filling open space with a *tapis vert* (Jellicoe, 1975) (Figures 2.1 and 2.2).



Figure 2.2: Trimmed shrubs at Versailles (Image © Nicholas Serrano 2011)

In these earliest instances of planting design, or gardens where the organization of plants was a central theme, attention to their formal features was key to the use of plants. The aesthetic theory of formalism best explains this theme. At a primal level this theory is that “appreciation is to be directed towards those aspects- textures, lines, colors and the resultant shapes, patterns, and designs- which constitute the form of the object” (Carlson, 1979b, p. 100). Indeed when using plants early landscape architects were intuitively focused on such formal features, or those “which objects or combinations of objects have in virtue of that which constitutes their form” (p. 99). That is to say formalism is the

aesthetic discourse over the physical features of design in terms of the familiar elements of line, form, color, and texture, all formal qualities that are the physical features that constitute or define a given object or combination of objects.

Plants were highly manicured in early gardens (Figure 2.2), both for a cultural sign of care and to adapt their use to the function of shaping outdoor space. In this respect a dialogue of formalism is quite fitting. What is interesting is that these gardens were created in or before the 17th century, yet formalism as an aesthetic theory was not well promoted until the late 19th to early 20th century (Parsons, 2008).

Beginning in Landscape Painting

Formalism in planting design, landscape architecture, and landscape art altogether has its roots in the 18th century landscape painting and gardening (Parsons, 2008; Ross, 1987). Prior to this movement, the ordered nature of Western gardens was revered for domesticating landscape in similar fashion to traditional architecture. Wilderness of nature was, in many respects, feared and order created a distinction between garden and the landscape beyond (Crandell, 1993). It wasn't until the English Landscape Garden made famous by Humphry Repton and Capability Brown that landscape architecture developed a more "organic" or "naturalist" look.

The aversion to wilderness came in part from people's lack of exposure to native land outside of their constant struggle to exist in it (Crandell, 1993). From the Middle Ages and as population increased through the Renaissance, cities

and towns found themselves expanding closer to and encroaching upon the very “nature” that urban development was founded to keep at bay. Inside the walls of a town was safety and comfort from the foreign creatures and unpredictable weather of nature; few ventured further than what was called for.

With the treaty of Utrecht in 1713 the European Grand Tour resumed and travels between lands as distant as England and Italy became increasingly popular among society’s elite (Ross, 1987). What was previously precluded by war, poor roads, and the threat of wild beasts became more common as men crossed the vast wilderness to learn about the cultures separated by it (Parsons, 2008). In their travels people became increasingly exposed to wilderness not in the fight of expanding development but in the leisure of travel, allowing for a more repose appreciation of it.



Figure 2.3: Evening Landscape by Salvator Rosa (Image © Web Gallery of Art)⁷

⁷ Evening Landscape [online]. Available at: Web Gallery of Art, <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html> (Oct. 28, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United

Exposure to wilderness through travel was catalyzed by artists waiting at the destinations whose very work informed how travelers viewed the wilderness they were crossing. The goal of a Grand Tour was to learn about the culture and arts of other lands, thus gentlemen found themselves patronizing Dutch and Italian masters of landscape painting. At this time these artists had developed an interest in the sublime of wilderness and had turned to representing it as the subject of their paintings. Through framing specific views of it, landscape painting glorified the experience of landscape and influenced travelers to actively seek out views in their excursions. In this respect interest in viewing native landscape evolved after the popularity of landscape painting itself (Crandell, 1993; Ross, 1987; Johnson, 1979).

The Emergence of Formalism

The effect these landscape painters had on travelers of the Grand Tour largely reflects the present notion of landscape appreciation. In attending to experience of landscape as painting, individuals seek to appreciate it in a similar fashion yet bring with this dangerous distinctions that, while applicable to painting, are absent in actual landscape. Most consequential to the development of formalism is the imposition of a frame.

It is in the very representation of landscape within a frame that artists cause the formal features of landscapes to emerge as central to its appreciation (Parsons, 2008). In lived experience the disparate elements of one's

environment hold their own quality, they are indeterminate and measured only in relation to that which perceives them (Berleant, 2005). As one walks along a path their attention shifts from one element to the next, possibly delighting at the birdsong from inside a tree's canopy before noticing a patch of violets alongside the worn trail. Each part of the sensuous landscape, though realized in sequential fashion, maintains its own definition and how the percipient notices its presence.

Once captured within a frame these separate elements of landscape are defined not with regards to their presence to the individual but in relation to each other. Creating a compositional whole is necessary for landscape painting and the features at an artist's disposal are mainly formal aspects of that which they are representing (Johnson, 1979). He or she takes liberty accentuating and diminishing features of one element as it relates to another to strike the needed balance. Color of one tree might be heightened to offset bold lines of a mountain; the form of one rock could be particularly pleasing in contrast to the wild beast perched upon it; William Gilpin called for "an ancient oak to give the foreground grandeur and to mantle over a vacant corner in the landscape" (Johnson, 1979). The formal features of an element are important to its determinate aspect such that it can relate to others of a work in an overall compositional whole (Carlson, 1979b). Indeed, formal qualities of plants and landscape emerge from the imposition of a frame (Hepburn, 1968; Johnson, 1979).

Yet it is the frame which holds these elements together, which pits one against the other such that they are measured by their determinate formal aspects. In actual experience there is no frame, no unifying factor causing a person to contrast between elements in such a formal fashion, and each speaks to the individual directly (Berleant, 2005). What emerges from seeing landscape as painting is an appreciation focused on formal features (the definition of formalism) which is defined by a frame not really existent.

The imposition of a frame brings with it two other concerns separating appreciation of painting and landscape: the isolation of sight and position of percipient. Paintings are two dimensional representations of vistas at a single point of view, forcing a static representation necessarily informed through vision. This focuses on those qualities which can be perceived through visual distance, namely formal ones as defined in the preceding paragraphs (Carlson, 1979b). In essence seeing the landscape as painting is to view it as a reflection of its reality through the isolated sense of sight, but the reality of being in a landscape is quite different

Even standing still in a landscape not moving ones head, the single perspective from a solitary point of view is unattainable. The human eye perceives at nearly 180 degrees horizontally and up to 150 degrees vertically with increasing ambiguity at diverging points (Johnson, 1979) (Figure 2.4). What is front and center with the greatest overlap of the eyes is visually focused through attention, yet that which lies at the extremes is far from left out. What emerges is realistic in the center and surreal at the edges, for “we do not take in

a wide view in discrete sections; the eyes do not sample spot after spot”
(Johnson, 1979, p. 27).



Figure 2.4: *Quinn Swamp* (Swamp, 2010). (Image © Nicholas Serrano 2011)

Seeing landscape like painting would define a solitary point of view similar to where this individual stands, but would such a painting be wide in length with media increasingly smeared at the edges? Or would it be a series of images with increasing and then decreasing abstraction of content as read from left to right? The perspective of human visual experience is far more complex such that even a sedentary view in landscape cannot be translated to the single, framed view of a painting.

Formalism and painting necessitate a focus on visual perception due to another main distinction between it and actual landscape, the position of percipient in relation to what is being appreciated. As painting is a two dimensional representation to be displayed in a gallery there is a necessary due distance between the individual and landscape, one that is highlighted by the frame which transitions between the two (Carlson, 1979b). Yet actual

landscapes, as noted above, are perceived from within where there is no separation and isolation of visual sensation.

The experience of landscape speaks to the totality of an individual's senses as it envelopes one on all sides (Hepburn, 1968). Sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch continually beckon for attention, though not so obvious, so that one sensation is always perceived in the context of peripheral others. Without the separation of an art gallery, visual isolation is far from the reality of aesthetic experience. Whereas one might see the wind implied by the shape of a tree's bending branches, simultaneously feeling that same wind in their hair would undoubtedly have far reaching implications for appreciation⁸. In actual experience one is both "ingredient in the landscape and lingering upon the sensations of being thus ingredient" (Hepburn, 1968, p. 51).

Ultimately, the positioning of percipient in, rather than distanced from, landscape has important consequences to the details which they attend to. If the experience of landscape is akin to that of painting, the isolated sense of sight would focus on visual formal qualities, yet this is not what happens. Landscapes are not two dimensional objects perceived from a single perspective and separate from oneself. The distance necessary of painting is absent in perception of landscape one inhabits, thus dissolving all similarities with its appreciation. One is necessarily in a landscape they perceive, exist as part of it

⁸ I borrow this example from a similar one accounting the effects of feeling rain on ones face, though cannot remember where I read this lest I cite it directly. To that author I apologize.

through time, therefore perception of an experience is not visually frozen but temporally continuous.

Should an individual bring with them a keen eye previously informed as to the “formal” properties of landscape, as many contemporary designers do, there is still the lack of a figurative frame which places limits on that which is appropriate to appreciate. Most visual arts have some sort of definition that separates them from the surrounding environment and directs an appreciators’ attention to the pertinent aspects of inspection⁹ (Berleant, 1993). Sculpture sits on a pedestal, a play is confined to the stage, and websites are captured within the computer screen. Whether each is seen in an art gallery or high school auditorium is irrelevant to how one values the artistic qualities.

Because one is necessarily in landscape as previously described, there is no separation between them and the very “object” of appreciation; one is “both actor and spectator” of landscape (Hepburn, 1968, p. 51). In the panoramic scope of vision, is one to consider only that which is clear from being directly in front, and if so to what degree of width? How far from ones position does the “landscape” in question begin? Along the Blue Ridge Parkway there are many fabulous “scenic overlooks” plagued with unkempt vegetation meant to frame the specific scene, thus is one to assume the many whip shoots springing into the vista does not affect its value? Is color of a leaf judged solely on its individual saturation or in contrast to surrounding vegetation? Should the Star Magnolia be

⁹ Granted this is an overgeneralization, but serves as a point of departure.

revered for the beauty of an individual, opening flower in neglect for the hundreds more that are in various stages of decay?

Ultimately, appreciation of formal properties of plants and landscape is inappropriate for to do so is to attend to properties that emerge artificially through seeing the landscape as painting. It was through containment within a frame that such properties emerged to begin with, a focus which is absent in lived experience. Should one bring an informed focus on the formal properties to their appreciation of landscape, they will find difficulty still in likening such appreciation to that of painting due to a lack of distance, presence of peripheral sensations, and undefined scope. Thus, formalism is appreciation of landscape for something that it is not (painting) with abstracted qualities artificially present (formal ones).

Contemporary Frames and Practice

If painting is responsible for the emergence of formal qualities of landscape, the photographic image is to be credited for its prevalence in contemporary culture. What started as paintings and found trouble in an artist's frame continues in postcards and camera viewfinders of professional and amateurs alike (Crandell, 1993; Crawford, 1993; Johnson, 1979). The most pertinent example are the scrapbooks and slide presentations of family road trips taken across the country to "See America", undoubtedly from "Scenic Overlooks" of grand vistas. As they progress along their continental visual buffet, loved ones back home periodically receive postcards of the "places" they have visited, an image most emblematic of that particular locale.

The very idea of a postcard is some scenic depiction of place or representative element that imparts upon the recipient a desire to seek it out, not unlike how travelers of the Grand Tour sought picturesque views of wilderness in their journeys. Yet at the same time any postcard image of landscape is as composed as painting, if only through the viewfinder rather than frame (Figure 2.5). Robert Smithson (1994) once noted that “there is something abominable about cameras, because they possess the power to invent many worlds” (p.15).

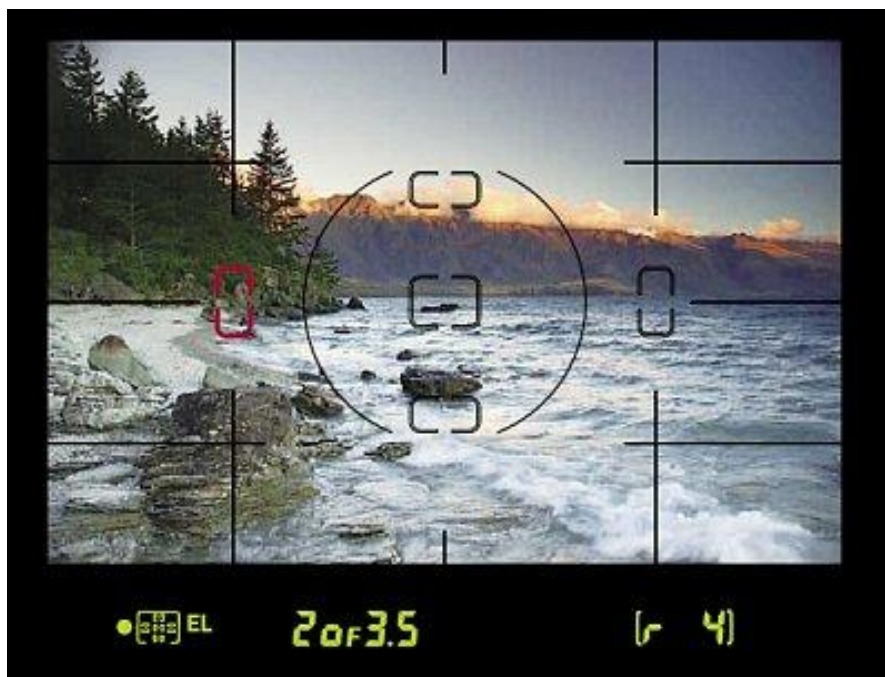


Figure 2.5: This image was taken from a blog titled “Look into the viewfinder, not through the Viewfinder” showing how photography is about composing an image. (Image © Jordan Wallace 2010)¹⁰

Today practice, education, and research of landscape perpetuate the cyclic engagement with formalism developed 300 years ago. Nearly all the

¹⁰ Available at: Spectrum Studios Photography, <http://www.spectrumstudios.com.au/2010/blog/look-into-the-viewfinder-not-through-the-viewfinder/> (Oct. 28, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

professional discourse on planting design, as evident in articles or monographs of popular work¹¹, uses the language of formalism in reference to what might be “aesthetic” properties of plants. In select instances authors hint at a greater overreaching factor of beauty, but inevitably reach back to the familiar language of formalism for lack of a concrete foundation for deeper beauty.

This is not surprising, for in landscape architectural education students are taught to develop a visual connection and understanding with the world. Introductory studios are offered almost exclusively in conjunction with drawing classes where they are trained in the classics of design technique such as positive/negative space, balance, and composition, all of which are in reference to a frame. They develop an intimate understanding with the world around them by drawing it as often as possible, through which only the formal features of landscape elements are at their disposal. Students learn the history of their profession through slide presentations, to present their ideas on 24”x36” boards, and display their talents in portfolios. This is not to dispute current pedagogy, only to explain how the formal understanding of our world is ingrained in education¹².

The academics teaching students exhibit similar cultural affinities towards a visual aesthetic. In many respects scholarly discussion of aesthetics remains anemic and the academy is limited to historical accounts or ecological and

¹¹ Although it would be inappropriate to claim having surveyed all existing work, this research has covered what the author considers a substantial body of literature on planting design

¹² The author finds all of these techniques useful and necessary to the proper education of a landscape architect.

systems oriented investigations¹³ (Meyer, 2008). Both theoretical and practical research seems to have been subject to a “modernist polemic calling for...the application of scientific principles to design supplant[ing] the preceding rhetoric....marginaliz[ing] beauty as an issue” (Nesbitt, 1995, p. 96).

There remains, however, some body of research on contemporary aesthetics, yet one would be hard pressed to find many examples that do not focus on identifying formal qualities. Visual landscape assessment in the last half of the 20th century remains the main form of empirically showing the values of landscape architecture to an objective scholarly culture. In practice this is nothing more than methodically using the very process from which formal properties emerged in landscape to reaffirm their existence. Further, there is little evidence beyond basic correlation that definitively proves people are reacting to those specific formal features and not an overreaching metaphysical connection to landscape in general¹⁴. How would one prove that?

In commenting on such landscape preference studies, Susan Herrington (2006) notes how their scope limits imagination to what can be described in a particular photo and reduces the “act of landscape architectural design to the selection of items from a wish list” (p.23). Formalism is central to this conception of design by describing the very features defined in such “wish list”. Herrington’s implication is that there is much more to the experience of landscape than what

¹³ These claims are focused on, but not unique to, North American Academic circles.

¹⁴ Although it is possible to show people react favorably to landscapes with particular formal features, it seems impossible to separate these formal features with the process of reception.

can be perceived visually, and that a more appropriate question might be “how are people moved by landscapes?” (p. 23).

In most fields research informs practice, yet the design professions have a reciprocal relation between the two such that formalism is equally rampant in both. Exemplary planting design is essential to successful landscapes as evidenced in the projects and designers idolized through professional awards. Despite this presence in winning designs, professional discourse on the topic remains largely absent to the point of neglect (Byrd, 1999; Morrison, 1999). , Formalism remains the main theory applied to the aesthetics of plants in the constructed landscape, relegating plantings to compositions of objects defined based on formal features just as artists would use in a painting.

Could It be that designers, intuitively drawn to the beauty of plants, recognize the disparity between such and the insufficiency of formal language to describe it? In their disgust for formalist framing are practitioners prematurely dismissing planting design as mere ornament of landscape, as a perfunctory level of construction documentation (Morrison, 1999)? One is reminded again of Garrett Eckbo’s words on how planting design has become “a by-product..under pressure from our lingering poetic conscience, [that] recognize[s] the necessity of leaving some...space for planting. This grudging acquiescence to a poetic pressure that is tolerated but not understood reduces planting to a minor decorative role” (Eckbo, 1969, p. 151).

Two Objections and a Point of Departure

The wealthy elite on the Grand Tour were taught to see native landscape similar to how painting is appreciated, therefore being capable of abstracting wilderness into lines, form, colors, and textures. This new perspective greatly influenced how they shaped and appreciated their own gardens, spurring the landscape gardening movement in England and bridging the gap between the ancient and modern era of landscape architecture (Crandell, 1993). Yet the profession inherited not only new influences on how the garden could be shaped, but also a language of aesthetics that is so deeply engrained as to become doctrine in planting design.

Ultimately, current aesthetics of planting design have two unsurpassable faults; the objectification of plants and focus on visual perception. Allen Carlson summarizes this best by noting that “when we conceptualize the natural environment as ‘nature’...we are tempted to think of it as an object...[w]hen we conceptualize it as ‘landscape’ we are certainly led to thinking of it as scenery” (Carlson, 1979a). Formalism has as its definition the primacy of attending to formal features of objects, therefore solidifying the treatments of plants as objects upheld through visual treatment of landscape.

The central dilemma of formalism in painting and landscape is founded in the principle that “associating design with art mistakenly generalizes from a common but not universal formal order, since design is but a genetic explanation of the order that may be found in art” (Berleant, 1993, p. 238). Though the frame is principally responsible for the confusion of formal properties in each, it is

important to recognize the implications of such properties are separately operable. In art formal properties may be directly pertinent, in landscape design they may be more of a distraction.

But a distraction from what? True Beauty. The goal of any landscape architect should be to create a beautiful place, however forefront or buried amongst programmatic goals. By focusing on the formal features of plants, designers have developed an aesthetic system which does not have at its core the beauty of plants with which they are using as medium of design expression. This is the beauty present in the “lingering poetic conscience” (Eckbo, 1969, p. 151) and verified through acclaim of idolized projects, yet the lack of true understanding has led to professional acquiescence to planting design which has consequentially developed into the perfunctory view of planting design.

If formal features fail to account for the true beauty of plants, what then is the true foundation of this beauty? This leads to a final controversy between fine art and landscape that remains to be addressed: that of authorship. With art there is an author who imposes a frame upon the work and brings artistic intent to be appreciated. In landscape, authorship is less clearly defined (Carlson, 1979a). Some may consider Mother Nature herself the author of landscape experience, but this would be to ignore the total effect of Mankind over the global ecosystem (Berleant, 1993).

Others may propose that in the domain of landscape architecture the designer should be designated as author, appropriately using the formal features of landscape to create pleasing gardens. It would seem obvious that as a fine art

the designer uses land, water, and plants just the painter does paint. Yet this position, while possibly applicable to the overall experience of landscape, fails when directed to the aesthetics of planting design proper for although the designer is responsible for their arrangement, who can deny a beauty inherent in the plants themselves?

A similar dilemma of authorship can be found in returning to the origins of formalism in landscape painting and gardening. The intent of these painters was not exact replication of landscape, but in representation of wilderness; it is the sublime of nature as seen in wilderness which gave these paintings their potency and inspired painters of this period to focus on landscape to begin with. Once translated to landscape gardening, designers inappropriately claimed authorship for working with the beauty of wilderness, yet lacked a language to describe their media and too readily adopted the formalist techniques of painting to refer to planting design. It was here in the adoption of formalism that nature became objectified and perception was focused on vision, its two central faults that counter its appropriate fit in planting design. Yet planting is not painting, it is wilderness, and it is in the sublime of nature, not formal properties, through which planting gets its beauty.

“The patterns of abstraction order things in the world into countless frameworks that counter nature’s encroachments. We live in frameworks and are surrounded by frames of reference, yet nature dismantles them and returns them to a state where they no longer have integrity.”

--Robert Smithson (1994, p. 18)

In being the inspiration for landscape painting itself, nature is the author of beauty through which the system of formalism developed. Nature is the true beauty which formalism, as a pattern of abstraction, distracts designers from. It is the beauty which is incorrectly sought in the objectification of plants. It is also the beauty which dismantles formalism, rendering it useless to describe the sublime of wilderness in planting design. Lastly, it is through lack of proper conceptualization for the true beauty of nature that has led to professional acquiescence of planting design described through formalism.

This is not nature as objectified in landscape perceived as scenery. It is not a specific set of empirical characteristics seen of plants. Rather this is the nature as the “inherent or essential quality or constitution of a thing; the inherent and inseparable combination of properties giving any object, event, quality, emotion, etc., its fundamental character” (OED, 2011). Ultimately nature is the incarnate “principle of life that animates and sustains the human body” (OED, 2011). The beauty one perceives in plants through wilderness is the sublime of nature.

Chapter 3: Sublime Foundations of Contemporary Planting Design

The sublime within art disciplines is indeed a loaded term used to account for so much yet eluding description in many respects. Its origins in landscape architecture go back to the influence of landscape painting where artists tried to represent the intrigue of wilderness. As a novel attention, there was little existing dialogue on the voracity of wild nature and all designers could use to describe it was the experience its idea provoked within them. Contemplating wilderness in this manner indeed raised many questions: what lay beyond? How did it become? How far does it extend?

The ultimate experience is that of the endless unknown, a central character of the sublime. The sublime is generally seen in notions of boundless magnitude and power, what is often described as greatness (Berleant, 1993). Edmund Burke cites infinity, magnificence, vastness, and obscurity as absolute sources of the sublime (Nesbitt, 1995). In modern architectural design it can often connote materials or spaces of large scale (Meyer, 2011) yet also is seen in moments of heightened sensation and perceptual acuity (Holl, Pallasmaa, &

Perez-Gomez, 2007). In reality the sublime is naively understood, thus before getting into the specifics of its application to planting design it is necessary to develop a common foundation or definition.

Foundations of the Sublime

The traditional theories of aesthetics developed by Emmanuel Kant in the 18th century set the framework through which Western culture has built its understanding of beauty. In this model an individual is thought to perceive the surrounding world, mainly through visual observation, and reach judgments of beauty through internal contemplation (Berleant, 2005; Martin, 1981). Pleasure results from the appropriateness of ordering perceived features, when faculties of cognition can understand the presented qualities as complete concepts.

Traditional judgments of the sublime are similarly structured through a contemplative model that involves both sense perception and internal reflection (Matthews, 1996). Imagination is the central mental faculty that mediates between the two, however whereas in judgments of beauty it is in harmony with understanding, in the sublime imagination is in harmony with reason (Sheppard, 1991). The sublime emerges from an inability of the mind to match perception with rational conception of total understanding, therefore relegating it to a faculty of reasoning.

The observation of a northeastern storm is a sublime experience (Meyer, 1998). At the early onset one might take delight in how the wind rustles tree leaves, appropriately linking causal agent and reaction such that the mind can completely comprehend the phenomena at hand in a traditional judgment of

beauty. Yet as the situation progresses and the storm increases in vigor the mind is quickly overwhelmed.

Grease colored clouds billow beyond the horizon, exploding with thunder in cacophonous furry as rain blankets the earth from invisible reserves in the sky. The immensity of force, extent of energy, and confounding complexity of composition are beyond comprehension. There is no recourse for discernment, understanding is inoperable and one is left to reason with the unbounded magnitude and power of this storm (Meyer, 1998). The difference between these two forms of knowing, understanding and reason, comes from one's ability to comprehend purposiveness in the former versus simply reason with sensuous presentation in the latter (Matthews, 1996).

Traditional notions of the sublime structure reasoning in mathematic or dynamic conceptions. The mathematically sublime is a theoretical reason for completeness of knowledge, generally concerned with an estimation of size, whereas the dynamically sublime is a practical reason of might or force (Budd, 1998; Matthews, 1996). The vast expanse of billowing clouds or blanketing quantities of rain exceed definitive understanding of size, thus eliciting the mathematically sublime, whereas the leveling power of thunder or whipping hand of wind are vestiges of the dynamic force of nature. In both cases, one is powerless to fully understand magnitudes of scale greater than the human scope.

Another example comes from the concept of infinity or endless expanse of the universe (Figure 3.1). In grappling with such a thought, the imagination must

engage with both apprehension and comprehension through mathematical and aesthetic estimation respectively (Budd, 1998). Mathematical estimation apprehends measurement into understandable intervals. One can apprehend the scope of a solar system with respect to the planet, galaxy with respect to solar system, and the universe as an infinite number of galaxies expanding *ad infinitum*.

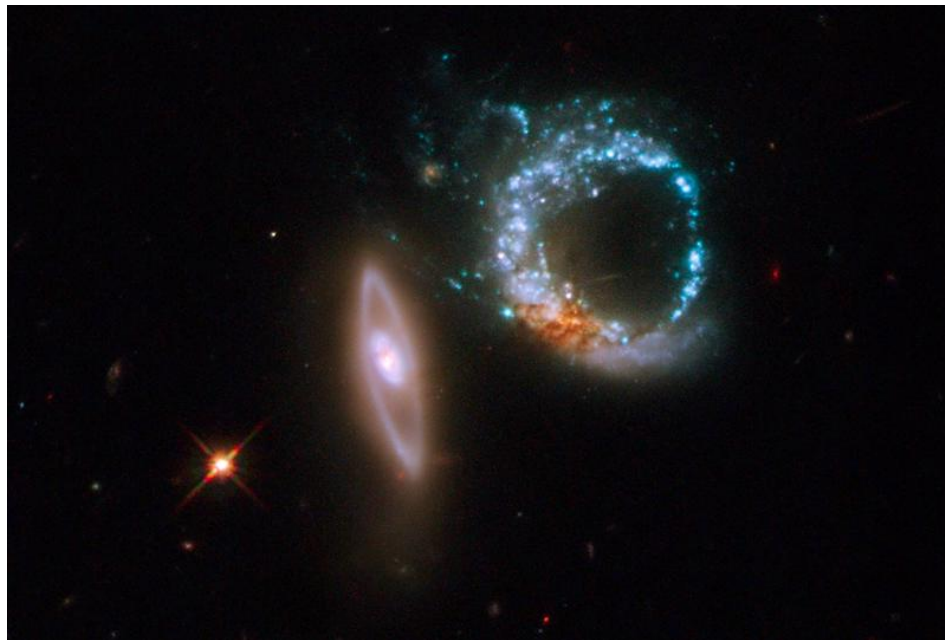


Figure 3.1: Interacting Galaxies. (Images © NASA STScI)¹⁵

For a judgment of beauty, aesthetic estimation comprehends an object in its entirety, yet magnitude is limited by what can be held together in a single intuition, a unified impression of the whole expanse (Budd, 1998). The mind uses imagination to understand the infiniteness of the universe by conceiving the

¹⁵ Interacting Galaxies [online]. Available at: HubbleSite, <http://hubblesite.org/gallery/album/galaxy/interacting/pr2008037a/> (Oct. 28, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

endless duplication of galaxies, but there can never be complete comprehension because aesthetic measure requires a total estimation of magnitude that imagination simply cannot grasp in its entirety. Instead, imagination and reason remain in a state of reflection from which sentiments of the sublime emerge when the two harmonize (Matthews, 1996). Judgments of the sublime are thus a source of aesthetic pleasure that explains delight in the incomprehensible, when objects or ideas extend beyond the limits of understanding and imagination secedes to sublimity.

The aesthetics of plants is a reaction of sublime beauty when imaginative contemplation reaches and projects beyond the limits of reason. In perceiving the features of a plant, mathematic estimation considers certain qualities, some physical while others ephemeral, and how they lead to particular reactions. Fine textures recede into the distance, sweet scents invite sauntering, and weeping forms create feelings of repose¹⁶. Formalism in this sense is amenable to a total judgment of beauty.

Despite an ability to describe specific features, indeed an important tool for design, this is not the beauty of plants in totality of their existence (Figure 3.2). They add pleasure to the experience of landscape beyond architectural form or decorative ornament, function more than ecological entities in an environmental system. Planting design (and landscape in general) has as its generative force the power of nature (Olin, 1988, p. 151), the essential quality that gives it its fundamental character. Plants are the *materiality of nature*, a biophillic

¹⁶ Claims common in texts on planting design.

relationship that provides “sustenance for the inner being” (Miller & Pennypacker, 1990, p. 51). As the materiality of nature actualized through wilderness, plants are, as Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980) notes, “the manifestation of living reality” (p. 25), the “principle of life that animates and sustains the human body” (OED, 2011). Plants therefore connect to individuals on a perceptual level beyond comprehension, a relationship that humans will never understand in totality but perceive with absolute certainty through internal intuition. An attempt to conceptualize this essence is akin to contemplating the universe; it is greater than aesthetic estimation and imagination secedes to the sublime.



Figure 3.2: The materiality of nature. (Image © Copyright Linda Hackett 1992)¹⁷

Contemplative Sublime in Plants

In contemplating the particulars of a specific plant, someone with little background in biology will primarily appreciate its physical features such as size,

¹⁷ *Achillea* [photograph]. Available at: The Parish Art Museum, <http://artists.parrishart.org/artist/258/> (Nov. 09, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

shape, color, or flowers. Further scrutiny may reveal situational context; the lone Burr Oak in a prairie field or foundation plantings anchoring architecture in landscape. The most thoughtful of novice appreciator could even consider hidden functions such as the anchoring spread of roots below or respiratory habit of leaves.

Yet even with an understanding of such disparate features, a total conception of the plant's essence as the culmination of these parts eludes understanding, forcing imagination and reason in a continual state of reflection. A majestic oak on an agrarian knoll can be appreciated for the shape of its crown, color of its leaves, and texture of its bark. It can even be seen for the animate features such as a casting shade or rustling leaves. Despite being broken up into individual features, one is hopeless to comprehend the total aesthetic experience in a single intuition, linking these different perspectives into a complete understanding is inoperable.

A background in science allows for even greater reading into the beauty of plants. Individuals who see semelparity for its sacrificial offerings or decomposition as regeneration of nutrients move past visual delight to meaningful interpretation (Figure 2.3). Ecological understanding is particularly potent for the beauty in situational context, such as the opened canopy left from a felled oak or the toxic juglone in Black Walnut. This informed appreciation of

natural beauty, or scientific cognitivism, has been a main topic of discussion in the aesthetics of nature (Carlson, 1981; Serrano, 2011)¹⁸.



Figure 3.3: There is beauty in the process of decomposition (left) and semelparity (right). (Images © Copyright Nicholas Serrano 2011)

For as much as science explains and widens understanding, it also brings new questions to the surface. Photosynthesis turns an inquiry of plant food into a complex cycle of photons, chloroplasts, and ATP, where as vegetative thirst leads to root structure, soil colloids, and cation exchange capacity (Rolston, 1995). Every question that is answered leads to hundreds more begging to be asked and despite a more detailed path, the conclusion is similar as one is unable to conceive of the plant and all its interrelated processes entirely. Mathematical estimation gives much information on the biological, pathological, physiological, and ecological extents, yet the limits of imagination are quickly reached. Even with the scientific superiority of knowledge necessary for ethical

¹⁸ See for example discussions of scientific cognitivism in the aesthetics of nature.

engagement, one can be presented with such immensity as to slip into the sublime (Rolston, 1995).

When judgments involve internal reflection, its full manifestation is limited to instances where one is directly attending to a plant and its beauty (Kant quoted in (Matthews, 1996, p. 172)). This is not to limit any subconscious effects on one's experience of landscape, only to say the fullest account of the sublime comes through direct contemplation. Indeed most experiences are catalyzed by conscious thought of passing events.

Intuitive Sublime

Though the sublime can be conceptualized through mathematic and dynamic solicitation, this is founded in traditional notions of aesthetic appreciation as cognitive valuation from contemplation of phenomena. Such structures were developed in response to traditional arts, yet when translated to the appreciation of environment they are complicated by a multi-sensuous and circumvent landscape. Environment is inherently background to cognition (Carlson, 1979a) which often negates the possibility that individual elements are causal agents of the sublime.

Phenomenology shows how landscape is perceived in a multiplicity of sensations that collaborate to create perceptual thought (See Ch.4). It is a sum of events that inform individual aspects of collective sensation, resulting in a specific yet intangible identify. Perceptual thought is distinct from cognitive thought such that the sublime is not actualized through mental conceptualization so much as in sentiment. The sublime emerges enmeshed from a totality of

landscape experience (Meyer, 1998) and one “feels” in a landscape more than thinks of it directly.

Noel Carroll (1993) suggests the beauty of landscape can coalesce in a familiar reaction he refers to as “being moved by nature”, an emotional response to the grandeur of a natural world. People routinely delight in landscapes of “moving” experiences such as a great waterfall or brilliant nighttime sky without any intellectual activity. Such emotional reactions are not enlightened by natural history or contemplative valuation, they are visceral responses informed by perceptual thought.

A luminous sunset over the Currituck Bay of North Carolina exemplifies a “moving” experience of nature (Duck, 2010). Every evening families gather on docks of aged timber to celebrate the passing of day into the respite of night on this coastal landscape. Nestled in the riparian terrain, marsh grasses are stirred by a cooling breeze of salted wind that Mother Nature sighs, exhausted from activating the day with warmth of her light. From afar the sun begins to collapse upon the horizon, hazed rays beaming upon clouds in colors of baked vibrancy. Stillness echoes throughout as one is moved not by contemplating vastness of bay or brilliancy of light, but through a subconscious sentiment of sublime reverence to the magnitude of nature’s beauty.

Although Carroll does not liberate “being moved” from cognitive thought, it supports the sublime as a common reaction in appreciation of nature. “Being moved” by nature, when coupled with a phenomenological perspective of perceptual thought, is very much an imaginative reasoning of the

incomprehensible sensation of nature, albeit subconsciously activated. One can be moved by the sublime without actively thinking about it.

Moving experiences with plants are common to most humans. Walking through a deciduous forest in any season seemingly transports an individual from casual saunter to exploration of mystic woods, trunks of trees extending endlessly in all directions as plants scatters the floor (Forest, 2006). Pine savannas have a distinctly different feel, more sparse and open while also somewhat strangely familiar, no doubt with some relation to our biologic heritage¹⁹. The prairie, while somewhat neglected in the hyper visual contemporary culture, also maintains an expanding grace as a “Garden of Region” of a slow agrarian nature (Harkness, 1990).

Nor are moving experiences of plants limited to a natural context. The quadruple alleé of American Elms on Washington’s National Mall combine form, stature, and order to provide a distinctly moving experience. Some may argue this has more to do with the experience of landscape than the trees themselves, but it is hard to believe telephone poles or radio antennae would provide for a similar feel. Plants very much provide for moving experiences of the intuitive sublime which can be cultivated through sensibilities.

The Sublime in Contemporary Planting Design

The sublime aesthetic is found in that which lacks total understanding through preconceived notions due to unbounded conceptualization. It is seen in moments of perceptual discernment beyond the capabilities of human

¹⁹ See for example Jay Appleton’s prospect refuge theory

comprehension, where one is confronted with a reality of the indeterminate and forced to reckon with their own inferiority. Reasoning translates perception through imagination and pleasure is found in a harmony of the two.

The obscurity that Edmund Burke noted as an absolute source of the sublime is directly manifest in abstract expressionism of the 20th century avant-garde artists and architecture (Nesbitt, 1995). Liberated from figurative representation, artists reflected on representing the indeterminate and focused on depicting the metaphysical with their newly defamiliarized medium of artistic expression (Figure 3.4). The sublime surfaced as a response to presentation of the unrepresentable, in the visibility of the invisible, and in subjective reaction to immensity of the metaphysical (Lyotard, 1982). Exploration of a new frontier confronted the appreciator with the unfamiliar; indeed what was unknowable, demanding a response of the sublime.



Figure 3.4: A painting of the abstract expressionist era, *Symphony No. 1, The Transcendental* by Richard Pousette-Dart. (Image © Estate of Richard Pousette-Dart 2011)²⁰

²⁰ *Symphony No.1, The Transcendental* [painting]. Available at: The Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1996.367> (Nov. 09, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

Moving from the Beau Arts to Modernist traditions, architecture elicited a similar reaction through its new cannon of practice. In abandoning the decorative defense of buildings, architects concentrated attention on spacial configuration in response to functionality and found beauty in efficiency of design. Buildings were no longer restrained by conventional conceptions of exterior appearance and instead designed around a programmed experience of space.

This new conception of architecture redefined the concept of a beautiful building. With focus was no longer on visual appearance conforming to a social architecture in relation to the building itself, design responded to experience of the individual and architecture was accountable to pleasurable sentiments of its inhabitants. Building found artistic expression in the indeterminate and invisible; in space itself (Nesbitt, 1995). This minimalist nature left little to empirically engage for aesthetic estimation and imagination was the main faculty of experience, quickly slipping into the sublime.

The early manifestation in the western tradition of landscape architecture started as an effort to extend architecture of estates out-of-doors, as evident in the ancient Islamic and Italian gardens²¹. Plants were used as material to order the natural environment, to impose the hand of man and make nature legible (Figure 3.5). The principle operative of design was to create boundaries in the landscape (Crandell, 1993). Beyond this, flowers were used to decorate the garden similar to ornamentation on building before modernist architecture. It

²¹ As per the discussion in the Introduction.

wasn't until the 18th century landscape painting and gardening movement that interest in wilderness for its inherent characteristics surfaced (Parsons, 2008; Ross, 1987), and the sublime emerged in reaction to nature's boundless glory or magnitude.



Figure 3.5: Plants used to order nature. (Image © Nicholas Serrano 2011)

Contemporary planting design has similarly undergone a reversal of roles from that of historical Western gardens. Where it was once a material to impose the order of man on nature, its present agency is in many respects an effort to reinsert wilderness in an overly developed landscape (Figure 3.6). Its disposition has changed from that of separating man and nature to fostering connections between them, planting design is “our poetic lifeline back to Mother Nature in an increasingly denatured world” (Eckbo, 1969, p. 141).

Gone are the days of parterre gardens, pleached trees, and geometrically trimmed hedges that gave structure to an inadequately ordered environment.

Today plants are revered for their organic addition to a concrete world where the simplicity of natural complexity provides a much needed biologic respite of the soul. Where plantings once ordered the structure of space, they now compliment the structure of landscape. What once threatened the psyche in the unknown of wilderness now threatens in contrast to a banal landscape.



Figure 3.6: Wilderness growing in the urban landscape. Intersection of Florida and New York Ave in Washington DC. (Image © Nicholas Serrano 2011)

The aesthetics of planting design are supported by an underlying sublime appreciation for the beauty of individual plants. While it is possible to describe specific features such as those outlined in the formalist tradition, the ability to conceptualize a plant's essence in its entirety as the materiality of nature is beyond comprehension. Both contemplative and subconscious imagination secedes to the sublime which emerges from contrast between biophillic familiarity and enigmatic complexity.

The beauty of plants is found in their essence, but planting design necessarily extends beyond the individuality of its component parts. It is choreography of experience, a rhetoric that refers to things not present and establishes a particular mood or feeling (Olin, 1988, p. 163). Just as abstract expressionism and modernist architecture used traditional medium to design artful experience, the media of planting design is an indeterminate obscurity found in the materiality of nature as manifest through the medium of plants. Planting design confronts one with the beauty of wilderness where plants actualize a sublime reality that is, just as in abstract expressionism and modernist architecture, “found wherever one attempts to walk the line between beauty and its other, when visible struggles to represent the invisible” (Meyer, 1998, p. 28)

The Sublime in Practice



Figure 3.7: Lily Lake Residence (Michael Vergason Associates), a sublime landscape. (Image © Nic Lehoux 2010)²²

²² Available at: American Society of Landscape Architects, <http://www.asla.org/awards/2008/08winners/254.html> (Oct. 27, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

In striving to reinsert nature in a mundane constructed environment, the naturalistic style of planting would seem an obvious way to embrace sublime beauty of wilderness. Landscape architecture has attempted to incorporate such an approach since the environmental movement of the 1980's. With the advent of the New American Garden style, the practice of designing natural looking plantings gained momentum among designers, with enthusiasm among the general public lagging 20 years behind. Despite progress, much of the public still disapproves of unkempt borders or "weedy" plants and the methods for implementation lack a focus on aesthetics, being easily distracted by the measurable ecological capacity of nature (Meyer, 2008).

Many professionals claim ignorance is the culprit for public discontent of natural plantings and that education is key to gaining collective approval for appearance of ecological landscapes. Informational signage is now common to such plantings in an attempt to dismiss the visually unfortunate through an environmentally responsible initiative. Others suggest cultural cues are likely key to incorporating these new design strategies within mainstream landscape by highlighting intent and guiding perception (Mozingo, 1997). One such strategy that outlined messy-looking ecological plantings within orderly frames of mown turf proved public tolerance of large portions of said plantings (Nassauer, 1995).

While pleasure may be affirmed through ethical obligation and maintenance can distract from messy plantings, neither is a response to the generative power of nature. Landscape should not have to explain or offer

compensation for aesthetically defunct composition but needs itself be the origin of beauty. Orderly frames are in many respects similar to educational signage that reframes a perspective of landscape and asks the individual to look past a planting's reality. Art and nature have a long storied history, but while nature may be a metaphor underlying art, there is needed authorship in art that extends beyond pure nature (Carlson, 1981; Olin, 1988). Placing nature in constructed landscapes is different than designing with nature; the former is a material for actualization in the latter.

The "strength of landscape architecture derives from the fulsome sensual properties of the medium"

--Laurie Olin (1988, p. 156)

Plants are the medium of expression for the materiality of nature, thus it is imperative to address them directly through distinctive use of physical and perceptual properties that distinguish planting design from the pictorial²³. The context of traditional contemporary plantings introduce wilderness in a developed world, design needs to develop a dialogue with incarnate nature. Rather than capturing untamed wilderness within a frame, it should provide sufficient order to make it directly legible in experience. The imperative of communicating intent is the generative force of architecture (Holl, Pallasmaa, & Perez-Gomez, 2007) and the art of planting design is in orchestrating its elegantly minimal suggestion.

Plants and their natural arrangements are complex beyond human comprehension. Science makes sense of this from an empirical perspective, but

²³ This draws a comparison with the difference between sculpture and the sculptural as outlines in Koed 2005.

its experience in the everyday easily reaches limits of the imagination, a central aspect of the sublime in wilderness. To harness its power in design, it is necessary to make it directly legible, to alter nature ever so slightly to provide human insight. This happens through a certain type of abstraction, not as reduction of reality, but a “meditative exploration that arrives at a crystallization of the complexity and richness of the world” (Ando, 1991, p. 9) to “organize the real around an intrinsic viewpoint to give it order through abstract power” (p. 10).

The execution of designing with the sublime in built landscapes is an exercise in balance between the complexity of virgin wilderness and control of human order. A forest is one of the most abundant yet equally complex ecosystems of the world. In its natural state it remains a plethora of entities and sensations beyond total apprehension, yet through minimal subtraction and abstraction it “is of limited extension and becomes a grove, it remains intelligible” (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, p. 27). Still there is a balance to be maintained, for lining the trees in neat rows may impose too much order such that it takes away from the sublime of wilderness. One could argue Dan Kiley’s allee at the Miller House is sublime, but this is sublimity of a different order than wilderness, that of human order. When designing with the beauty of wilderness, “[s]acrificing immediate visual clarity and order may be a welcome price to pay for the somatic appeal of indeterminacy and discovery” (Berleant, 2005, p. 37).

Perhaps one of the masters of designing with the true character of nature was Arthur Edwin Bye. He was not for straight replication of natural scenery, although experimented with that as well, rather he sought to design with

inspiration from nature's muse, using its forms and processes. With thoughtful editing of the natural landscape, he crystallized the essence of wilderness by intensifying its character and creating a unity among elements (Miller & Pennypacker, 1990). Ultimately Bye was a student and designer of nature's mood, using the devices of concentration and amplification as rhetoric for sublime experiences of landscape.

The 1991 entry garden for the corporate headquarters of General Mills (no longer in existence) was a successful experiment of naturalistic planting that merged wilderness with conventional landscape use (Figure 3.8). In contrast to a 1950's institutional building, the designers used an abstracted prairie to both stand out against the surrounding architecture and in allegorical contrast to the company's heritage (Gillette, 1996).

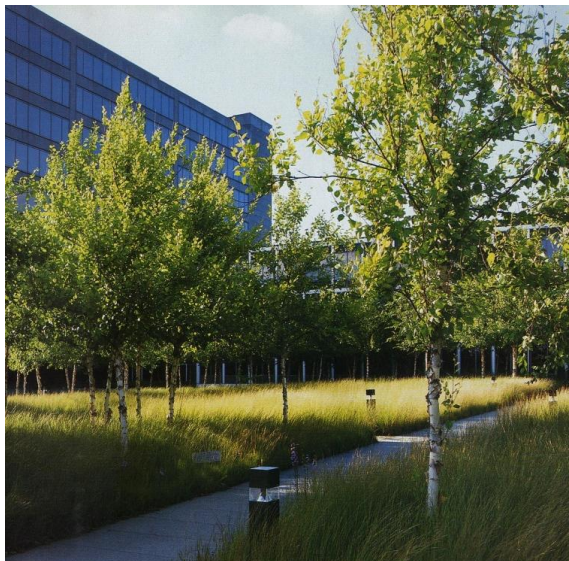


Figure 3.8: General Mills Headquarters Designed by Michael van Valkenburg Associates. (Image © Susan Gilmore 1996)²⁴

²⁴ Available in: Landscape Architecture Magazine Vol.86(10), October 1996. Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

What made the General Mills garden successful was how it harnessed the beauty of a natural planting, but in a definitively constructed manner. It is not a real prairie transplanted to a corporate landscape, nor is it framed in the conventional language of landscape care, rather it's the essence of a prairie abstracted to the program of a corporate entrance garden. Through a subdued plant palette in a seemingly naturalistic arrangement navigated by architectural paths, the beauty of nature is marginally restrained, just enough to make it legible in a constructed landscape, while retaining the force of sublime wilderness.



Figure 3.9: A little order is all that is necessary to convey intent and make wild plantings legible. (Image © Nicholas Serrano 2011)

The 21st century is seeing an increase in projects that harness the sublime beauty of wilderness through planting design. The High Line in New York City exemplifies minimally legible wilderness (Figure 3.9). What would normally be

dismissed as weedy plantings include just enough culturally legible aspects that have been exaggerated so that one sees into the planting aspects of intent. Yet this is minimal intent, not enough so to direct attention as with normal cultural cues of design (Mozingo, 1997), only to allow the sublime beauty of wilderness to captivate in its own right. It is nature intensified to the human perspective, hypernature (Meyer, 2008).

Conclusion

The sublime aesthetic is found in that which lacks total understanding through preconceived notions due to unbounded conceptualization. It is seen in moments of perceptual discernment beyond the capabilities of human comprehension where one is confronted with a reality of the indeterminate. Reasoning translates perception through imagination and pleasure is found in a harmony of the two.

The aesthetics of plants is a reaction of sublime beauty when imaginative contemplation reaches and projects beyond the limits of reason. Plants are the *materiality of nature*, a biophillic relationship that provides “sustenance for the inner being” (Miller & Pennypacker, 1990, p. 51). Plants connect to individuals on a perceptual level beyond comprehension, a relationship that humans will never understand in totality but perceive with absolute certainty.

The media of planting design is an indeterminate obscurity found in the materiality of nature as manifest through the medium of plants. To harness its power in design, it is necessary to make it directly legible, to alter wilderness ever so slightly to provide human insight where planting design can confront one with

the beauty of nature. Yet the traditional language of formalism, while pertinent to parts of plants, does not seem to describe the aspects through which the sublime emerges. “A designed landscape that evokes the sublime is unlikely to be an autonomous form, an objectified landscape” (Meyer, 1998, p. 25). What is needed is a new conceptualization for the aesthetic experience of planting design.

Chapter 4: The Aesthetics of Engagement

The beauty of plants is a sublime reaction to their essence as the materiality of nature, yet to stop at such an explication is not a complete understanding of their aesthetic. It is akin to stating the beauty of architecture is found in space itself without noting how to design a building: what good is beauty if it cannot be actualized in practice? The completion of being is found both in the soul and a body which executes its presence.

There were two points of contention with formalism as an aesthetic theory; the objectification of plants and focus on visual perception. Recognizing the sublime of plants as the materiality of nature negates objectification by placing their beauty with the intangible. Its actualization in practice resolves the eminence of visual perception by addressing how plants are experienced as an aesthetic event.

Perception

The problem with traditional theories of environmental perception is the dualistic treatment of landscape as a separate static entity with no reciprocal

relation to an individual. Surrounding environment is little more than a visual buffet which humans, with higher cognitive abilities, contemplate to make judgments of both beauty and reason. Indeed since the beginning of aesthetics as an academic domain, vision has been given special mention as the main mode of perception (Martin, 1981). The very idea of “view” necessitates a distanced perspective with definable limits or frame, neither of which exist in the actual experience of landscape (Carlson, 1979b).

In the late 19th century Edmund Husserl founded a branch of philosophy known as phenomenology which hopes to resolve the visual/cognitive complexity of perception by finding experience as the only source of true knowing²⁵.

Whereas traditional Kantian aesthetics attempt to resolve the dualist division between knowing intellect and judgments of the surrounding world (Matthews, 1996), phenomenology places emphasis on the body as a sensing organ, on its interaction with the environment as directly perceived before cognitive interpretation. This life-world takes a more animate personality, serving as living medium rather than subservient background. With such a renewed perspective focus can shift from reasoning, central to traditional judgments of taste, to exploration of experience.

Sense Perception

A phenomenological understanding of environment is navigated not visually but with the whole body in relation to self as center of measurement (Mettler, 1947; Berleant, 2005; Rolston, 1998). Hand, eye, nose, and mouth

²⁵ This was developed over a number of works.

work in concert to dimension the environment producing an interrelated perspective of experience. Sound reverberates the scale of space, scent gives substance to invisible air, and taste can define tactile quality. Even a gaze, often improperly understood, only mediates based on the unconscious mimesis of other senses (Pallasmaa, 2007).

“to see [is] only to touch more accurately”
–Louis Kahn (Lobell, 1979, p. 8).

If vision is the principal mode of perception then the typical beach should be by all respects a boring landscape. People like places that are well defined through discernable contrast (as typified by the suburban lawn), yet the beach is flat, linear, expansive in all directions and lacks limits. It is the boring Midwestern prairie²⁶, only with water. Sand, sea, and sky make up its materially impoverished palate and save for the occasional dune grass or unagreeable crab, it lacks all forms of life.



Figure 4.1: We necessarily perceive the beach with all our senses. (Image © Erin Stemple 2011)²⁷

²⁶ This is not to say a prairie cannot be beautiful in its own right, only to pull from previous work of other philosophers of aesthetics

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Yet every summer millions of people from all different continents and cultures flock to the sea. Despite a visually sterile character, the beach remains a rich and complex experience of landscape necessarily perceived with all the senses (Figure 4.1). One feels sand between their toes, hears the crashing of waves, and tastes the musty of maritime air. Sight is framed in the experience of these periphery senses: these are the qualities by which people yearn for a coastal retreat.

Senses collaborate to articulate perceptual thought such that the actuality of landscape is informed through correlating perceptions in relation to a bodily awareness (Mettler, 1947; Pallasmaa, *An Architecture of the Seven Senses*, 2007). Everything one knows of the outside world is in relation to corporeal experience. For example, it is in this multiplicity of sensations that one understands the reality of an ocean wave. These appear as sinuous forms amplifying the water's glass-like surface; water eventually exploding upon water as gravitational forces cause the entropic collapse into a frothy mix. One notes their audible presence through rhythmic roaring of rolling curls, or tastes the air impregnated with a salty mist. Though these features describe aspects of a wave, it eludes complete knowledge.

True understanding of the wave is a visceral experience of water crashing upon the body. One knows a wave from experiencing it firsthand, from feeling the force of its furry crash upon the skin, dislodging and digesting one into its

being. All other intelligence -the sight of its habit, the sound of its cacophonous fury, and the taste of its salty mist- catalyze a corporeal understanding. The multiplicity of sensations understands perception measured through a physical relation, through using one's body as the dimension of experience (Mettler, 1947).

"I perceive the wind surging through the branches of an aspen tree, I am unable, at first, to distinguish the sight of those trembling leaves from their delicate whispering. My muscles, too, feel the torsion as those branches bend, ever so slightly, in the surge, and this imbues the encounter with a certain tactile tension"

--David Abram (1997, p. 60).

This does not deny the eyes, ears, nose and mouth as providing individual intellect, rather recognizes them as distinct modalities of an anatomical existence (Abram, 1997). Diverging from a single body, senses converge upon the phenomena of perception as specializations of the skin to create the multifaceted perspective of experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) notes that "My perception is [therefore] not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being...which speaks to all my senses at once".

Still, standing on the beach while marveling at its unrelenting beauty, one is powerless to define individual aspects of the landscape. You are aware of a salty sea breeze, can feel the intimacy of cradling sand, and feel the warmth of radiating sun. Yet none of these elements can be sufficiently described individually because they emerge as an enmeshed experience (Holl, Pallasmaa,

& Perez-Gomez, 2007), united in the existence of an animate, living landscape (Abram, 1997).

The Living Landscape and Participatory Perception

“Everyone is the other, and no one is himself”

--Martin Heidegger

Traditional models of landscape perception focused on visual sensation are based on a Newtonian understanding of space as abstract medium (Berleant, 1988). Objects are physically distributed based on some outside force and separated by measurable void which quantifies relationships between them. This develops the distance necessary for disinterestedness and necessitates a panoramic model of landscape where viewer is separate from environment (Berleant, 1988).

The classical conception of space fails to account for the aesthetic significance of coastal landscapes. Such a limited appreciation would see nothing more than vacuous expanse of sand and water, a panoramically benign scene. Yet this is not the experience encountered, landscape is not the combination of surroundings situated in sterile spatial medium but is a culmination of perceived sensations. The beach is desired for its energizing wind, the warming sun, a felt presence of waves, and how these combine to orchestrate an exclusionary experience.

Holmes Rolston (1995) notes how individual and landscape are active in the realization of the other for “an *environment* does not exist without some organism *enviromed* by the world in which it copes” (p. 379). The

phenomenological understanding of environmental perception sees landscape as active in the evolution of experience. Cresting the sand dunes, a gentle slope suggests approach and one drudgingly advances as sand sucks energy from every step. When the ground levels out where carved by water, one is magnetized by the halting roar of crashing waves as surroundings beckon from all directions. Wind pushes from the north, waves crash from the east, the sun's reaching grasp falls off to the west. Space of a phenomenological landscape is not visually objective but temporally active.



Figure 4.2: The dance of landscape around an individual. (Connecticut Water Treatment Facility, Michael Van Valkenburg Associates) (Image © Elizabeth Felicella 2010)²⁸

²⁸ Available at: American Society of Landscape Architects, <http://www.asla.org/2010awards/105.html> (Oct. 27, 2011) Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

As one walks along a meadowed path parts of the landscape come into view as others recede behind constantly changing frames (Figure 4.2). Branches rotate, topography twists or turns, rises then falls, as the landscape reveals itself in the dance of experience. The world outside a window stares back at she who regularly looks to it for inspiration. The sun brightens and dims like the breathing of the sky as clouds travel across an ocean blue ceiling. Trees stand firm with grounded trunks as branches seem to reach out and dangle leaves to her temptation. The continual reciprocity between percipient and landscape perceived verifies the existence of an animate world (Abram, 1997).

Landscape is a living, breathing body as much in existence as that which perceives it. It grows with time, produces to sustain itself, responds to forces acting upon it, and heals over injustices. As an ecological system, it evolves through the laws of nature in which it exists: it responds to the same biotic and abiotic framework humans live in. The energy one feels in a gust of wind transfers to the dancing of perennial leaves and swaying summer flowers.

What is noticeably different from the panoramic and participatory conception of landscape is the role of space. Instead of abstract medium opposed to objects, space of a participatory landscape encompasses the individual into a becoming of experience, an event of perception. It develops “a continuity between the conscious human body and its perceptual world” (Berleant, 1988, p. 89), physically and spiritually.

Space of a participatory landscape is not medium for objects but a matrix of sensations in the web of experience. Landscape is interpreted through direct

and periphery sensations, each framing one another in measured perception against the individual sensing bodily organ. Rather than opposed to mass, space connects perceiver with objects of perception to facilitate the synergistic realization of landscape, creating a dynamic fusion of two beings into a single becoming.

Perception cannot rest entirely in individual or landscape: at another time or in another person the experience would be different²⁹, yet one cannot deny the veracity of landscape as objective reality. Instead, perception can be seen as a conversation between two animate and dynamic beings, each revealing itself to the other (Abram, 1997; Berleant, 1988). While the perceiver effects the environment, so too does environment frame perception of surroundings, so too is periphery sensation framed by the imposition of environment on individual. “[E]nvironmental features impose themselves on the perceiver and the perceiver energizes the environment, both functioning in a reciprocal fashion” (Berleant, 1988, p. 94).

“Forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair”

--Kahil Gibran

A phenomenological understanding of environment sees landscape as medium fused with participant to create a single dynamic reality (Berleant, 1988). Both are living bodies in a constant conversation participating in an existence where each defines and is defined by the other. The distinction between one and

²⁹ This example most certainly belongs to another work yet its citation has been lost in the depths of memory, and to that author I apologize.

another is not of static object and dynamic preceptor but of two interacting entities.

The Aesthetic of Engagement in Planting Design

“the garden is a personal gathering of nature” that “become great events in your mind”

–Louis Kahn (Lobell, 1979, p. 38).

The phenomenological perspective of a living landscape active in the spatial matrix of sensations is at odds with traditional formalistic treatments of planting design in landscape architecture. Formalism has at its focus the visual features of landscape in a present tense when the reality of haptic interaction evokes the experience of a temporal continuum (Pallasmaa, 2000). Aesthetic experience takes place from the perspective of an individual (Rolston, 1998), thus aesthetic dialogue should be of personal activity. The following passage by Juhani Pallasmaa illustrates this temporal valuation in relation to architecture:

“Architecture is usually understood as a visual syntax, but it can also be conceived through a sequence of human situations and encounters. Authentic architectural experiences derive from real or ideated bodily confrontations rather than visually observed entities. Authentic architectural experiences have more the essence of a verb than a noun.”

--Juhani Pallasmaa (2000, p. 81)

Duration is unique to the art of architecture as people inhabit the environment in time “through a sequence of human situations and encounters”. There are two key points to this quote; that architecture is a *human* situation and that it is experienced over a series of *encounters*. This is a shift in the traditional view of architecture as the actual construction by placing it in the human realm and involving interaction between the individual and building. Architecture is not

the buildings itself but an encounter, the dialogue it has with that which perceives it.

The art of landscape has similar activation through duration where experience is from a human perspective in interaction with the landscape over a series of encounters. Recognized as a human situation the perspective is from the individual and phenomenology is how one navigates this active world. Landscape is not the built construction but an encounter, the dialogue it has with that which perceives it, thus it is therefore possible to see planting design not as composition of objects but an unfolding through an evolution of events.

The beauty of planting design is found within the third dimension of time. Traditional formalism is two dimensional by finding beauty in the 1) formal features of plants perceived 2) visually in the present moment. The reality of experience involves a third dimension of temporal continuum; instead of visually perceiving compositions of objects, one phenomenologically navigates through plantings as an evolution of events. It is here in the temporal continuum that the intangible is activated, and it is here where the beauty of the sublime emerges. In describing the experience of a forest Holmes Rolston (1998) notes that “aesthetic experience of forests is an interaction phenomena during which the forest beauty is constituted” (p. 161).

“I am two with Nature”

--Woody Allen

Planting design is an evolution of events, a series of encounters between individual and landscape. It very much involves both individual and planting in a

“participatory eventfulness” (Rolston, 1998, p. 162), where a dialogue is developed over the spatial matrix of sensation. It is the dynamic fusion of individual and landscape into a single becoming where planting design is an encounter with the materiality of nature. The appropriate agency of plantings then is not defined by formal composition but to the degree of engagement with individual, planting design should be viewed as an aesthetic of engagement. And it is a perspective of subjective engagement that ensures proper consideration of the disparate elements in the conversation between individual and landscape.

Direct Engagement

Environment is inherently background and the ubiquity of plants is a daily encounter; this is the dilemma of landscape design (Carlson, 1979a). Contrast underlies the palpability of art such that an individual takes notice and attends to its sensual qualities. Direct engagement occurs when plants rise to the center of attention and are responsible for sensory navigation of surrounding space.

Traditional planting design refers to specimen plantings as individuals meant to be centerpiece of a given design, generally in a visually dominate fashion. Though this might seem like an instance of direct engagement, there are distinctions in the dialogue developed in each. Specimen plantings do not require close interaction of plant with person and often specimen plantings are set off in a distant view, implicating the panoramic landscape model of appreciation (Berleant, 1988).

Although on occasion specimen plantings will exemplify direct engagement, a more appropriate description for directly engaging plantings might be that of a sculptural quality. Similar to planting design, historically sculpture has been included with the visual arts where perception is dominated by hegemony of the eye (Martin, 1981). It was essentially thought to be multidimensional painting; however when contemporary sculptors started investigating abstract forms, the autonomy of sculpture separate from visual arts became clear. A main distinction comes from the way sculpture sustains itself in perception and the important connection of vision with haptic sensations to understanding the work of art (Martin, 1976). Whereas a painting is perceived visually to be comprehended intellectually, sculpture directly evokes tactile sensations that elicit kinesthetic responses from the body (Mettler, 1947).

Another distinction of sculpture is the reciprocal implications it has with surrounding space. Most paintings are displayed on an art gallery wall but sculpture, as a three dimensional object, is set in space and has consequences on the surrounding atmosphere. Size or scale, directionality of form, relation to other objects, and contrast with encompassing context all effect the perception of sculpture with respect to an individual and are distinct to the experience of purely visual arts. Sculpture creates an enlivened space where “the perceptual forces in [the] surrounding space impact our bodies directly...we sense its power penetrating the surrounding space” (Martin, 1976, p. 282).

The imperative of haptic sensation and effect on surrounding space implicate phenomenological perception as most appropriate for understanding

sculpture. People perceive with all senses synergistically such that space is a matrix of sensation through which the bodily senses converge upon the locus of sensation (Abram, 1997). Because sculpture enlivens and effects surrounding space, part of its artistic agency is in how it effects phenomenological perception through this matrix of sensation. Returning to the body, senses collaborate to articulate perceptual thought in relation to a corporal understanding, a model particularly pertinent for haptic sensations eliciting kinesthetic responses.

“We know a tree is vertical because we have stood beside it, feeling in our own muscles the tension which is required to maintain the vertical position. We know it is tall because we have let our eye run up the height of it and inclined our heads to look to the top. We know it has thickness because we must walk around it in order to see it from all sides, and we know the trunk is rough because we have moved our hands over the bark”

--Barbara Mettler (1947)

Sculpture is an artifact of sculptural quality which can be understood as the distinctive use physical and perceptual properties of materials as artistic medium (Koed, 2005, p. 150). The perceptual properties of directly engaging plants are identical to that of sculpture, thus if using plants in engaging ways is seen as a distinctive use of physical properties, the requirements of plants having sculptural qualities are met.



Figure 4.3: The Hollywood Juniper exemplifies the sculptural qualities of plants (*Juniperus chinensis* 'Torulosa') (Image © Stephen Coles 2007)³⁰

The Hollywood Juniper (*Juniperus chinensis* 'Torulosa') is a practical example of this concept (Figure 4.3). Based on a genetic deformity, its main branching is sparse making the few limbs that do grow appear sculpture-like in contrast to the void of usual branching. The plant commands attention visually, but not to the exclusion of a sappy scent or soft tactility. It is sensually rich, however the dominate response upon seeing this plant is above all kinesthetic as branches appear like appendages of an individual tortured with scoliosis. Seeing their arms twisted and frozen as they reach out to nowhere, one feels their pain in their own arms.

³⁰ Tentacle Juniper [online]. Available at: flickr, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/stewf/550516804/> (Oct. 27, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

The Hollywood Juniper is sculptural in how it magnetizes surrounding space. When on its own it demands notice, temporarily erasing all distracting elements as the percipient is powerless to ignore it. The distortion of branching that commands attention and elicits a kinesthetic perceptual response results in a plant with sculptural quality, a plant sculpture.

Individual plants can themselves be sculptural, however planting design is a separate matter where the medium is not individual plants but the arrangement of them in landscape. This supposes a double level of sculpture, both in individual plants as sculptural objects and in the experience of planted arrangements, similar to the sculptural works of land artists. In both cases the sculptural experience of direct engagement in planting design is the result of intentional framing, not in the landscape painting sense of word, but the in the relationship a planting has with its surroundings. Perhaps a better term is contextual contrast. A Hollywood Juniper alone needs little framing other than a minimally differentiating background, it frames itself, however numerous Hollywood Junipers lined in a row lose their strength. In this example framing comes from proper distance between specimens to allow each to stand on its own.

Contextual contrast in this sense is not exclusive to a physical border, though it is certainly an option, but means some factor that differentiates a plant with its immediate surroundings as to make its presence palpable. The Hollywood Juniper has such a dominate presence on its own that little framing is

necessary, but other plants such as an oak or maple may need more contrast. Framing is not a fixed standard but scale relative to experience.

Indirect Engagement

When plants directly engage with an individual they are elevated to sculptural status, but the reality is plants normally function as background elements in the landscape by structuring the experience of space. Early Western traditions of Italian and French gardens used plants as material to order the natural environment through imposition of geometric form (Jellicoe 1982). With advent of the landscape gardening movement in 18th century England plants as an aspect of wilderness were used to frame and accentuate representations of sublime wilderness (Ross, 1987; Carlson, 1979).

Today plants are still often used to structure the design of space, but there is a difference between conventional architectural function and the orchestration of beautiful moments. Indirect engagement is when plants are not the focus of attention but author captivating experiences of landscape. These functions characteristically act on peripheral perception and are directly pertinent to a phenomenological perspective of landscape appreciation.

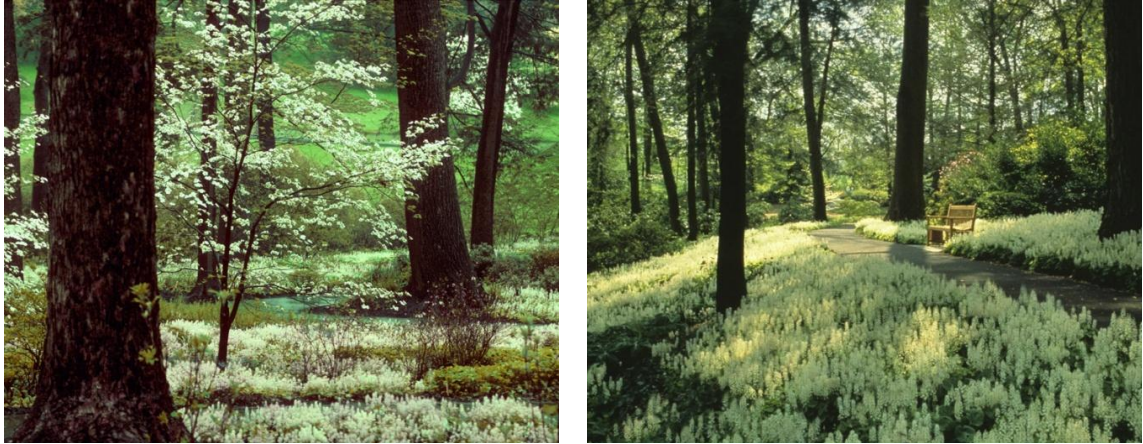


Figure 4.4: *Peirce Woods* at Longwood Gardens, Designed by W. Gary Smith.
 (Image1 © Rick Drake 2004³¹, Image2 © W. Gary Smith 2004³²)

Peirce Woods at Longwood Gardens is an example of plants indirectly engaging an individual with landscape (Figure 4.4). Though not a single focus of attention, multiple plants act collectively to create an engaging experience of landscape as an individual moves through it. Walking along the woodland path on a warm summer day, one unconsciously delights in dappled shade of tree leaves invisibly far above any frame of visual detail yet every bit pertinent to situational mood. A white spring bulb blankets the ground linking the distant floor forward and creating unity throughout space. Much anticipated Dogwoods blooms contrast against an evergreen backdrop to highlight the tree's irregularly horizontal structure as they hide behind massive trunks supporting the forest canopy. Sounds remind of trees' animate character as wind makes movement

³¹ Cathedral Clearing [online]. Available at: American Society of Landscape Architects, <http://www.asla.org/awards/2004/04winners/406-10.html> (Oct. 27, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

³² The Waterfalls [online]. Available at: American Society of Landscape Architects, <http://www.asla.org/awards/2004/04winners/406-07.html> (Oct. 27, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

audibly present. These features culminate in a landscape experience greater than any particular piece as one focuses not on specific parts but the passing of temporal experience.



Figure 4.5: *Coastal Island Retreat* designed by Oehme van Sweden Associates, where plants are not the focus of attention but set up engaging moments in the landscape. (Image1 © James van Sweden 2008, Image2 © Richard Felber 2008)³³

Indirect engagement acts on space as the matrix of sensations in the web of experience. Plants, as bodies in this matrix, literally warp space so that as one moves through it they are engaged not by the individual bodies of plants themselves but through experience of a warped matrix of sensation (Figure 4.5). Movement through the landscape becomes particularly pertinent in this sense,

³³ Available at: American Society of Landscape Architects, <http://www.asla.org/awards/2008/08winners/254.html> (Oct. 27, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

planting design as an evolution of events is critical to indirect engagement, and what becomes palpable are not the physical but ephemeral qualities of plantings.

As hyper sensual details of landscapes, plants contain the potency of biophilic familiarity able to effect peripheral perception far beyond that of normal elements. They carry the tempo of the earth, are linked through a common natural history with its inhabitant. So too are the rocks and soil players in the evolution of environment, but these elements operate on time scales far greater than the scope of intuition. In the landscape people need plants that “fit natural cycles and our inner sense of time and are clearly suited to our ways of sensing things” (Lynch, 1972, p. 69).

Planting design is not just the placement of plants in a constructed landscape but also includes proper framing of existing vegetation. The construction of boardwalks in natural landscapes is a strategy used to introduce the public to native ecosystems in a minimally invasive way, yet often little attention is given to the existing vegetation as functional planting design. Locations for “scenic outlooks” may note where openings make for impressive views, but there is much greater opportunity to harness the sublime beauty of a natural landscape based on how vegetation serendipitously choreographs one’s progression through it.



Figure 4.6: *Berkshire Boardwalk* designed by Reed Hilderbrand. (Image © Andrea Jones 2011)³⁴

Berkshire Boardwalk exemplifies how design can respond to existing vegetation such that plants author engaging experiences of landscape (Figure 4.6). A hand crafted pile and plank system navigates between established plants in a line that seems dictated as much by temporal events as by landscape form. Slender trunks hide future spatial enclosures that unfold in the sauntered telling of progressive realization. The path partially hidden kinesthetically beckons advance to a sinuous meander interwoven with massing where emergent grass meets decaying stags. Despite being totally un-authored, the landscape imposes itself on those in its presence, “exerts influences on the body...contributes to shaping the body’s spatial sense and mobility and, ultimately, to defining the lived-space” (Berleant, 1988, p. 93).

³⁴ Available at: American Society of Landscape Architects, <http://www.asla.org/2011awards/351.html> (Oct. 27, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

Ethical Engagement

Plants are usually perceived separate from any background knowledge of their contextual role, without any understanding of what they are beyond being called plants and the physical properties that can be seen forthright. When plants are understood in light of their functional and ecological background perception is reframed much in the same way people commonly appreciate archeological ruins for their cultural significance. Ethical engagement accounts for pleasure derived from knowledge of a plantings functional or ecological role in the greater landscape.

The Coliseum in Rome is quite literally a round open-air building falling in on itself, but one would be hard pressed to argue it holds little architectural value even though as a building it is functionally decrepit. People appreciate its historical value, for the culturally significant events that took place inside its walls, and as a reminder of where they came from. Knowledge of these past events is crucial for its appreciation, without which it would be seen as nothing more than a crumbling building, but with which it is proclaimed one of the greatest architectural structures of all time.

Knowledge has had a long and storied role in the appreciation of fine art. Recognizing that art is a cultural artifact with authorship from an artist, to appropriately appreciate a work of art one has to view it in light of its historio-cultural context (Carlson, 1981). To appreciate the painting *Guernica* (Figure 4.7) with no understanding of its background one may conclude it to be an awkward in terms of the non-aesthetic perceptual properties (Walton, 1970).

Forms are unrealistic, narratives appear mixed, and indeed it is difficult to understand what is happening. Yet most would reject the statement ‘*Guernica* is bad art’ because it is understood in the specific category of cubist art, and therefore perceived it in light of this knowledge (Walton, 1970).



Figure 4.7: *Guernica* (Image © Picasso Estate)³⁵

Translated to the appreciation of natural organisms, the basic premise is that “knowledge of the nature of the object dictates acts of aspection and guides the appreciative response” (Carlson, 1993, p. 208). This does not preclude perceptual properties, formal or otherwise, however appreciation of such aspects without understanding of their context/function/significance is not a full appreciation of the objects aesthetic. It is only through knowledge that something can be appreciated for what it truly is, leading to the appropriate appreciation of art, which necessarily involves a cognitive component (Carlson, 1993; Matthews, 2002).

³⁵ Available at: Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:PicassoGuernica.jpg> (Nov. 10, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

Works of landscape architecture are an artifact of culture, thus planting design will mainly be appreciated as a work of art, and furthermore usually as background elements in the landscape (Serrano, 2011). This, however, does not preclude the possibility that some will appreciate plantings based on their ecological context. Moral responsibilities can impart aesthetic pleasure on an individual if their land is designed sustainably, but only through knowing ones responsibility to the land. Ethical engagement stems from recognition of meeting one's moral responsibility to the environment through planting design.

A clear example of ethical engagement in planting design would be the myriad ecological landscape designs touted in contemporary practice. From rain gardens and native plantings to Brownfield reclamation and habitat restoration, the sustainability movement in landscape architecture has gained considerable traction in the past 20 years (Meyer, 2008). The imperative to do good for Mother Nature is mainstream in social, if not economic, culture and landscape architects have responded in like fashion.



Figure 4.8: Informational signage at the *N. E. Siskiyou Green Street Rain Gardens*. (Image © Kevin Robert Perry 2007)³⁶

³⁶ Available at: American Society of Landscape Architects, http://www.asla.org/awards/2007/07winners/506_nna.html (Nov. 10, 2011). Image used in accordance with

The problem with ecological plantings is in most instances they are not clearly legible to the mainstream audience, often looking “weedy” or unkempt in the context of a developed world. Designers and land managers have responded by including informational signage to help people understand why the landscape looks as it does and how this differs from mainstream public landscapes (Figure 4.8). In this instance knowledge is used to reframe the perspective so one can experience the landscape as an ally in environmental conservation.



Figure 4.9: *N.E. Siskiyou Green Street*, Portland OR, Designed by Kevin Robert Perry (Image © Kevin Robert Perry 2007)³⁷

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³⁷ Available at: American Society of Landscape Architects, http://www.asla.org/awards/2007/07winners/506_nna.html (Nov. 10, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

The rain gardens of N. E. Siskiyou Green Street in Portland, Oregon, are an example of ethically engaging planting design (Figure 4.9). At the bottom of a residential street the curbs on either side extends into the parking zone with cuts at the top and bottom to allow rainwater runoff to enter. This gives water the chance to percolate in the soil and be absorbed by the plant roots before being taken into the city storm water system. Though not traditionally attractive in most seasons, the design was developed in collaboration with residents so they would understand its function and to develop a sense of ethical obligation in their community planting. Informational signage informs the passing visitor (Figure 4.8)

Therapeutic Engagement

The insistence on low or no maintenance requirements remains one of the greatest threats to contemporary landscapes (Eckbo, 1969). Gardens were originally designed around programmed connections between the land and those who cared for it, to be places where people maintained a close relationship with the continual evolution of plants. Many cultures continue to respect public horticulture as a vital part of the urban landscape. Impeccably maintained Parisian parks, typical British urban gardens, and ceremonial Japanese tea gardens are all examples of how people value gardening in daily life. Despite this, today economic pressures and the increasing pace of technological culture continually distract from the value of gardening in urban life.



Figure 4.10: *Evans Restorative Garden* at the Cleveland Botanical Garden designed by Dirtworks, PC. (Images © K. Duteil 2006)³⁸

Garrett Eckbo (1969) notes how people form “intimate continuous reciprocal relationships with plants” through “experience of living and working with plants of all sorts” (p. 153). Therapeutic engagement is the pleasure derived from direct physical or psychological interaction with plants that result in a calming effect on the soul (Figure 4.10). This is typified in the commonly regarded beneficial effects of gardening and the more recent academic investigations into horticultural therapy.

The notion that plants have a therapeutic effect on individuals is familiar to most as evidenced by a large body of survey research. What was known to many a gardener for centuries was introduced into empirical research with a

³⁸ Available at: American Society of Landscape Architects, <http://www.asla.org/awards/2006/06winners/294.html> (Oct. 27, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

landmark study that showed hospital patients in a recovery room with views onto greenery recovered faster than those without (Ulrich, 1984). It is not the intention of this paper to review the extensive literature on the topic, but the curious reader is referred to other excellent sources³⁹.

Therapeutic engagement remains the most tangible way planting design can affect an individual. It is a combination of intimate association with the plant and physical interaction with its objective presence. The first has to do with coming to know and understand the plant by investigating its essence, an aesthetically “exhilarating activity of coming to grasp its intelligibility as a perceptual whole” (Hepburn, 1968, p. 53). The second has to do with the kinesthetic interaction with a like biological organism, that pleasure is gained through using one’s body to explore that of another. These are the same relationship one develops with a pet or lover, albeit probably on a less significant level (depending on the lover).

In many ways therapeutic engagement is similar to direct and indirect engagement; much of the temporal and biophilic qualities that add to the sensuality of those situations act in similar roles here. Yet therapeutic engagement maintains a separate aesthetic significance because of the addition of personal effort an individual brings to the experience. In direct and indirect engagement, plantings are ready for perception and one brings to the experience nothing more than their presence (which itself is exceedingly consequential to

³⁹ Cooper Marcus, Clare and Marni Barnes. 1999. *Healing gardens: Therapeutic Benefits and Design Recommendations*. Wiley, John & Sons

how plants are perceived), but in therapeutic engagement one contributes to the activity through personal effort, therefore changing the reward of pleasure gained. The difference is akin to simply eating a cookie already prepared or savoring the pastry one has labored to bake.



Figure 4.11: Gary Comer Youth Center Rooftop Urban Agriculture designed by Hoerr Schaudt Landscape Architects. (Image © Scott Shigley 2010)⁴⁰

An increasingly popular example of therapeutic engagement can be seen in the myriad community gardens surfacing throughout urban areas in North America (Figure 4.11). As the landscape is becoming more and more developed people are finding themselves distanced from the very nature that sustains them. Furthermore, as is seems people are losing control of greater parts of their lives

⁴⁰ Available at: American Society of Landscape Architects, <http://www.asla.org/2010awards/377.html> (Oct. 27, 2011). Image used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code. All Rights Reserved. Further copying of this work may be an infringement of the Copyright Law.

and society, engagement in gardening provides a rejuvenating experience that calms the soul through traditional practice. It is also becoming a common way to teach children the greater lessons of life such as responsibility and sustainability for as has always been the case, the garden is a great metaphor for life.

Conclusion

The sublime foundations for beauty seen in plants as the materiality of nature necessitates a re-investigation into current views of aesthetics in landscape architecture. The present critique of planting design through formalism is important to describe certain physical aspects of plantings, but is not a total conception of how plants are experienced in the constructed landscape. Designers need to transition from seeing plantings as physical compositions to aesthetic experiences.

Landscape cannot be properly understood through traditional dualistic notions of aesthetics that separate perception of environment and judgments of beauty. Instead, the phenomenological perspective sees a participatory experience of landscape that emerges as enmeshed experience informed by collaborative intellect of the senses. Space of a participatory landscape is not medium for objects but a matrix of sensations in the web of experience.

Landscape is interpreted through direct and periphery sensations, each framing one another in measured perception against the individual sensing bodily organ. Rather than opposed to mass, space connects perceiver with objects of perception to facilitate the synergistic realization of landscape, creating a

dynamic fusion of two beings into a single becoming. Planting design is a temporal experience and the designer a narrator of events.

Through the phenomenological perspective of environmental experience one can see definitions of physical features lack the necessary scope of aesthetic dialogue. Formalism, while true in description of parts, does not account for beauty which, as John Dewy famously noted, rests in the act of perception. It is akin to describing someone only through the clothes they wear, which in reality tells little of one's character.

Planting design is distinct from an ordinary assemblage of vegetation in that it engages the individual. It fosters the continuity of body and environment by attaining its most complete consciousness allowing one to form deeper connections with the world (Berleant, 2005). Bernard Berenson describes the experience as when "the spectator is at one with the work of art...ceas[ing] to be his ordinary self and the...aesthetic quality is no longer outside himself. The two become one entity" (Berenson, 1948).

Planting design can engage an individual in four ways. Direct engagement is akin to the function of sculpture that demands focused attention and emanates its presence throughout a space. Indirect engagement is when plants are not the focus of attention but author engaging experience of landscapes. Ethical engagement accounts for pleasure derived from knowledge of a plantings functional or ecological role in the greater landscape. Lastly, therapeutic engagement is pleasure derived from direct physical and psychological interaction with plants that results in a calming effect on the soul.

Raffaele Milani (2009) notes how we can “define landscape in negative terms by distinguishing it from the land, space, environment, and nature, and realize that it is an art that comes into existence through the senses, the imagination, and work.” (p. xi). Whether one agrees that objective aspects of the environment literally constitute the landscape, Milani’s principle remains that what affects an individual is not so much their physicality as the dialogue they develop with that which perceives them. Plants existed before humans and will persist long after their departure, but the beauty of their current existence can only be seen in the dialogue they develop with an inhabitant. It is as Anne Whiston Sprin (1998) noted that “to design landscape is to come on stage during a performance already long underway and to engage and extend ongoing dialogues” (p. 50).

Chapter 4: A Concluding Example

“The [formal] perceptual aspects I see are, so far, given as ‘ordinary’ properties....They constitute, in short, the most basic, insistent, and undeniable fact that I must first contend with in seeking an aesthetic commerce with the building. Yet if there is anything architectural or aesthetic about the building, it must in some way inhere in this element, for it is the medium that embodies the design the architect created in the artistic process. This embodiment is what transforms an agglomeration of stones into a work of architecture.”

--Michael H. Mitias (1999)

This thesis started with the contention that formalism, or attention to the formal properties of plants, was inappropriate for understanding the underlying beauty in planting design. The problem with this contention is illustrated in the above passage by Michael Mitias, that formal properties of plants are all too obvious as to ignore and any aesthetic must inhere in this element. Mitias is correct to a certain degree, that formal properties are objectively present and consequential to the appreciation of plants in the landscape. Yet it also remains that focusing on formal properties, for all their undeniably present qualities, does not result in a complete understanding of the aesthetic experience. The words of

a poem have definite definitions, but their meaning is carried more in its context and reading.

Evidence in Experience

The true beauty of plants in the landscape is exemplified in the simple experience of a mature Oak (Figure 5.1). Seemingly sedentary in an open field, this patriarch of the prairie ecosystem manifests a deep beauty of nature deceptively represented in formal features. The tree definitely has objective qualities, yet this is not how its beauty is realized in experience.



Figure 5.1: The Tree at the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. (Image © Nicholas Serrano 2011)

From afar the oak may appear an irregularly conical crown, thousands of leaves too distant for discernment in a color washed out by the sun. A gusting wind brushing upon its branches cause the entirety of its body to dance ever so slightly, a ripple effect upon its shell mildly delayed in a manner like the lethargic

giant it is. From this distanced point of view it is seen as a whole standing in the expanse, its qualities captive as if within a frame. From a formalist perspective one might note its irregularly conical form, green color and fine texture. Closer inspection reveals the leaves' glossy surfaces which deepen their saturated color, pointed tip lobes that lend to their fine texture, or dense branching that solidifies its form.

Yet already the tree has violated the objective stance necessary for appreciation in a purely formalistic fashion. Animated by the gusting wind gallivanting across the landscape it shows life as its body heavily sways in tempo with the air. The tree gives a leading gesture in conversation between plant and person as it sparks intrigue and invites approach. The first move has been made in animation of the tree, now it is up to the person to respond by walking closer.

Upon approach the perspective quickly changes, the trees full form growing larger with each step forward, soon exploding field of vision as it engulfs the individual in its presence. Reaching branches sweep one under their stretching arms and one's attention switches from the tree as a whole to particular parts of its anatomy. One might delight in clusters of leaves as the substance of canopy, intrigued by their lustrous green color or bristle-tip texture. Tapering branches bend at leaf nodes like knuckles, slender in reach yet smooth to the touch as they evoke fingerlike feelings stroking the air.

Now under the canopy one is inside the tree and the matrix of sensation is has changed completely. There was outside, this is inside, both in the middle of an open field yet two different phenomena entirely. With a permeable ceiling

above and earthen floor below spatial scale is reduced to a more focused sensorial acuity where one can become intimately familiar with the tree.

Standing next to the trunk is a visceral experience. One knows its verticality from standing beside it, height from letting their eyes run up its length, depth from circumnavigating its width, and texture from touching its roughness (Mettler, 1947). Its large stature is not in comparison to surrounding objects, rather magnitude is self referential and in relation to the sensing individual.

Above all, one knows what it means to be standing in the middle of this field from standing next to the tree, observing its bodily presence through being a part of it in ones presence themselves, a visceral understanding of existence.

Dappled shade has both a cooling effect upon the skin and an activating energy for the eye as shadows dance violently across the ground in tempo with the wind upon ones skin. Comfortably inside the tree and a part of its presence, one looks up at the sky above, shifting attention from leaves separated from the void of space to that space itself and what is held beyond. Bending rays of light blur the void of leaves, bringing the infinity of sky beyond to the pocket below. Here spatial experience mixes with temporal continuum, evoking the first feeling of sublime presence as one recons with celestial time of eternity in the present moment.

This marks a point of inflection in the experience of that oak as sentiments of the sublime take full effect. There were hints of it before when the tree's presence exploded perspective and one was marveled by its intricate detail, but now one shifts from reception of information to evoking emotive sensation.

Having perceived the tree with all their senses, one starts to comprehend its full phenomena as an experience of presence. The tree beckoned from afar, brought one in, and caused a shift in attention from the details of itself to what lay beyond. One now looks out after being invited in and has a different perspective of the world awaiting, mystified in how this tree seemingly oblivious to their presence has redefined their perspective of the landscape completely. It is here, in the realization of power or how this tree is greater than oneself in its ability to change them, that one gains the full effect of the sublime.

The experience of nature is "not only a mutual involvement of spectator and object, but also a reflexive effect by which the spectator experiences himself in an unusual and vivid way"

—R.W. Hepburn (1968, p. 51)

The Oak has an irregular form, deep green color, and fine texture. These characteristics, though true in appearance, are the result of visual valuation from a fixed perspective which defines the tree's presence in proportion to surrounding objects. Definite views from particular points do not complete the experience of an animate individual active in the matrix of space. The landscape is experienced through constantly changing perspectives, each step forward bringing new insight as the tree shifts in relation to one's advance. The tree grows larger, surroundings receding in proportion to its engulfing presence, branches seem to stretch further, and the rustling of leaves is audibly amplified.

Perception of plantings is not visual delight in formal features but a lived evolution of events that emerge as enmeshed experience. The landscape is an active agent in the dialogue between individual and environment where plantings

are both defined by and define the position of an individual. It is as Michael Mitias again notes that “I feel the being of space, I feel enveloped by it, but I also feel that I am its source “ (Mitias 1999, p.70).

As one draws near from afar the tree, in a series of events, hides and reveals particular aspects to appropriately engage in the experience of planting. Where form dominates perspective at a distance spatial definition in relation to the individual’s bodily presence occupies sensual attention up close. The tree’s magnitude moves from visually impressive to audibly present as leaves rustle in a fall breeze. Frame shifts from dependence on physical borders to the focus of momentary attention (Carroll 1993). Sequence is particularly important as each event is further framed in the experience of previous ones, knowledge and sensation transgressing the borders of individual engagements.

“The movement of the body unfolds the content of the work and its relationship to its context. This unfolding through time and space affords the possibility of experiencing the sublime”

–Elizabeth Meyer (1998, p. 25)

The phenomenological perception of environment happens through a series of engaging moments linked together in the evolution of landscape. Although momentary attention may dictate contemplation of particular features, one’s perspective is continuously changing such that overall appreciation of landscape is an intuitive feeling that emerges from enmeshed experience. An individual may delight in the tree’s animate form from afar or its spatial composure from within, but these two events cannot happen simultaneously.

One can hold an acorn in their hand while sitting beneath an oak's canopy and contemplate the myriad events separating the two, yet mental estimating of this infinite complexity is conclusively deficient.

Yet true beauty in the experience of this oak does not emerge from any momentary perception of a solitary event. That being under the tree is vastly different than seeing it from afar has little consequence on its own. True beauty is found in the third dimension of time, through the phenomenological navigation of the planting events in a temporal continuum. It is here that the intangible is activated, where one event is contrasted with another, where realization of presence takes place, and where perspective is changed. As the materiality of nature, the Oak is able to engage the individual through a series of events and activates this experience in a living reality. Linked together over the temporal continuum, the resulting experience is of the sublime.

Conclusion

Formalism serves a crucial role in translating the unique properties of planting designs in terms suitable for intellection, particularly in a manner comparable with traditional fine art. By separating a plants line, form, color, and texture we can evaluate it in similar standards of painting or sculpture. Formalism is a language of mathematical estimation. One can use line, form, color, and texture to apprehended features visually *ad infinitum*, yet their combination results in a force on scales far greater, thus exceeding comprehension and leaving the imagination in constant reflection with reason.

Abstraction is a contemplative investigation of material richness that results in knowing; necessary for realizing the aesthetic potentials of design (Ando 1991). Formalism is indeed an abstraction of plants, yet it has at its core a main fault in assuming their effectual essence as physical objects. It prematurely diminishes a plants' concreteness while ignoring the materiality of wilderness. In describing a plants line, form, color, or texture, what does one know of the plant?

The true beauty of planting design is the sublime of wilderness authored by nature. Plants are the materiality of nature, the manifestation of living reality that provides sustenance to one's inner being. They develop a biophillic connection with individuals on a perceptual level beyond comprehension, a generative force of the sublime.

Planting design is choreography of experience, its media the indeterminate obscurity found in the materiality of nature. It confronts one with the beauty of wilderness where plants actualize a sublime reality. This is a beauty most palpable not in the ordering or disordering of human nature, but in slight legibility of virgin wilderness.

The experience of landscape is an enmeshed experience resulting from the collaboration of perceptual thought. One navigates the landscape not visually but phenomenologically, using all the senses in relation to a bodily experience. Perceptual thought is not garnered instantaneously, it is discovered over a temporal continuum, and plantings are not compositions of objects but an evolution of events.

Seen as an evolution of events, planting design is active more than objective, has more the sense of a verb than a noun. These actively unfolding events hold importance not in their physical manifestation but in how they engage the individual in a dialogue with the living landscape. This happens over the third dimension of time. It is in the temporal continuum that the indeterminate is activated and through the evolution of events that plants manifest a sublime reality. This is the beauty of plantings in landscape architecture.

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