

The Way it Was: a Landscape Architect in Post-War America

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abstract:

The second half of the 20th century was a dramatic and fertile period for the landscape architecture profession. This, to a large extent, can be attributed to the restructuring of urban America from industrial manufacturing centers to post-industrial service centers. While Olmsted in the mid-1800s established the passive urban park as a retreat, a safe harbor from the oppressive work week and the degrading urban environments, this new urban population of young professional and empty nesters was a population that chose to live in the city for its vitality and cosmopolitan character. Possessing time, affluence, and mobility, this group coveted places to live, play, shop, and see and be seen.

During this time, the profession experienced significant change, matured, returning from its Arcadian, anti-urban era to favor social relevance. Pressures of change presented designers with new materials and new sensibilities, compelling the profession to recognize that the city must be approached on its own terms as a center of social and cultural interaction. Without precedent or experience, a few adventurous professionals ventured into this unknown territory, blending new urban spaces, new architectonic forms, and industrial materials in response to the social and cultural demands of this new urban population. They invented spaces that facilitated the opportunities for formal and informal interaction. Understanding the street itself as a place for the people, and the space between buildings as inhabitable, these designers remade the European ceremonial plaza as market place of culture, performance, and celebration.

Increasing in confidence and stature, the landscape architect was no longer satisfied to inherit the arbitrary left over space after the buildings were placed. Demanding, and granted, a place at the table, they experimented boldly with the creation and reinforcement of the urban fabric. Space, now understood to be critical to the urban experience, could not be left to chance. Today, the profession is experiencing transformation yet again. In recent decades, materialism and market place considerations slowly trumped the social concerns valued in the 1960s. Though we may remain committed to our social role in the city, clients in the private sector seek the landscape architect as a commodity, accruing value to their brand. Professionals are being asked to replace social content with uniqueness for the sake of marketability. The prior upheavals, and the novel forms they compelled, were noticeable for their novelty; the profession is now being asked to make designs "different" purely to call attention to themselves. This commercial sector led shift has a reductive impact on the quality and content of much of today's design. Professionals are being chosen on the basis of how well their designs sell.

Our profession has always responded to the values of the era. Due to the economic downturn we may be entering a period of reevaluation, rethinking our priorities again. It will be interesting to see how this will shape our profession. What is clear is that this is not an insignificant luxury profession, handmaiden to aristocracy. Tomorrow will allow us to contribute in the area of conservation, preservation, and new and creative open space.