

Directed Landscapes: History and Theater in Contemporary Landscape Architecture

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“When we speak of the ‘scenes of our childhood’, or borrow Pope’s phrase and refer to the world as the ‘scene of man’, we are using the word scene in what seems a literal sense: as meaning location, the place where something happens. It rarely occurs to us that we have in fact borrowed a word from the theater to use as a metaphor.” (J.B. Jackson)

Scene of history

John B. Jackson understood and explored the myriad ways that landscapes live in our minds as cultural phenomena. The connections that he drew between the experiences of landscapes and historical forces that shaped them seem particularly relevant and useful today. Contemporary landscape architects must balance the urge to keep up and move beyond today’s stumbling blocks of economic and environmental degradation with the need to maintain that sidelong glance to the passing landscape of yesterday. Indeed, this is no new condition, and Jackson grappled with the same bifurcated view when he considered the car in the landscape in the 1970s. Brownfields, abandoned infrastructure, and landscape over structure (green roofs) are widely acknowledged as the scene of landscape design today. These sites are challenging for designers and visitors alike, and they offer the opportunity to reconsider the ways that design can address history and reception.

The growing interest in preservation and the continued backlash against modernism’s perceived lack of contextual reference are symptoms of the

increasing sense of fragmentation and disconnection in Western societies where the flood of images and the pace of technology provide for and demand a culture of browsing and brevity. It is from within this stream of the temporary that the search for rootedness and continuity stems, fertilizing nostalgic projects such as the slow food movement and the resurgence of handicrafts. Within the public imagination the land holds a special place as a firm and constant background against which the fleeting superfluities of the day are contrasted. Indeed, those not swayed by the flows of fads and trends are called grounded. We are encouraged and awed by the layers of geology and the artifacts of past civilizations unearthed from the land. This perception of land, and consequently landscape, as a source of continuity leads us to search for traces of the past in landscape.

Gardens and landscapes have long been places for the consideration of the past either explicitly in monuments, memorials, and cemeteries, or implicitly in other parks, squares, and gardens. While not all landscapes are designed with history in mind, we are conditioned to accept them as having existed long before we ourselves arrived. Consequently we search them for signs, marks or traces of the past. Even in the most urban plaza, built over layers of tunnels and fill, the first impulse is to imagine under the surface the thick primordial substance of the earth extending to its core. The space of landscape is open to the imagination and it is the stage for musings on what was once there. Sebastian Marot describes this phenomenon when he speaks of the garden as ‘a hollow where all of the epochs of the city are virtually and simultaneously present, because no single one

imposes itself in its built opacity'.² The scenes and stories that we imagine for landscapes are histories that develop from the particularities of a place: the materials, the slope of the land, the size and shape of the plants, and the rest. Naturally, many landscape architects seek to tap into this desire to make stories from the land and often construct their own narrative of the site to do so.

Design requires a narrative and the formalization of this narrative is much like the writing of history. Designs, like histories, are inherently selective though they can be more or less so. Designs, like histories, are created from a perspective or perspectives and are intended to be received by others who are often undetermined and unknown. Designs and histories are creative acts that extract critical components and actions from situations or events. However, the forms of designed landscapes are physical armatures for the understanding of the narrative while the structure of history is not as tangible. Therefore, when we endeavor to understand the design of a landscape as a parallel to the construction of a history, the metaphor is not completely productive. Another, perhaps more useful, metaphor, which bridges the physical and temporal divide between landscape design and history, is that of landscape as theater.

Landscape as theater

John B. Jackson's 1979 essay, 'Landscape as Theater', traces the evolution of the theater metaphor in landscape and shows how conceptions of the world around us changed with the progressive modes of producing landscape through theater. Theater backdrops function as simulated or representational landscapes from the meticulously realistic to the abstractly minimalist. Sound and lighting effects augment the scene to engage the audience in the narrative of the play. In his book on William Kent's drawings, John Dixon Hunt further explains the connection between landscape and theater through the experience and landscape representations of Kent. In addition to his garden designs, he designed stage sets and scenery for the theater which Hunt makes clear were utilized again in Kent's landscape designs: '[Kent] presents his spectators with the opportunities to be both spectators of a garden's dramas or even to participate in them'. Hunt continues, 'Some of his drawings imply that he envisaged these English garden stages or scenes as locations of various kinds of play: social play, the play of fantasy, the play even of a historical imagination'³ (figure 1).

Our understanding of landscape continues to be shaped by the representation of landscape in dramatic works of film and television. From the urban courtyard



FIGURE 1. Stage setting with Arcadian hermitage by William Kent. (Sir John Soane's Museum)

of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* to the ultra-modern Paris of Jacques Tati's *Playtime* to the New Urbanist town as stage set in Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*, landscapes and images of landscape are constructed theatrically in ways that alter or expand our perceptions of the environments that we inhabit. In most cases the connection between landscape and theater is most apparent in the construction of backgrounds and stage sets. However, the example of Tati is particularly useful because his films begin to expand the role of landscape such that it is at times both setting and actor. Monsieur Hulot interacts with the city and the garden (figure 2) and in turn the city and garden interact with Monsieur Hulot.

Rather than limit the metaphor of landscape as theater to the production of sets, there may be something to be gained from analyzing all of the parts of theater as they might relate to landscape.

If we begin to think about the parts of a landscape as components of a theater production (table 1), we are offered a fresh view on the design of spaces for an audience. The extension of the metaphor maintains the centrality of narrative

FIGURE 2. *Monsieur Hulot (Jacques Tati) in the Arpel garden in Mon Oncle.*TABLE 1. *Landscape and theater, extending the metaphor*

<i>Theater</i>	LANDSCAPE
<i>Background</i>	CONTEXT
<i>Props</i>	FURNITURE
<i>Stage</i>	SURFACE
<i>Lighting</i>	LIGHTING
<i>Actors</i>	FEATURES
<i>Director</i>	DESIGNER
<i>Writer</i>	CLIENT + PROGRAM
<i>Acts</i>	ROOMS
<i>Intermission</i>	PLACES BETWEEN
<i>Audience</i>	VISITORS
<i>Costumes</i>	SEASONS
<i>Make-up</i>	ATTITUDES
<i>Scaffolding</i>	INFRASTRUCTURE
<i>Projection</i>	VIEW FROM AFAR
<i>Introduction</i>	ENTRY
<i>Climax</i>	CENTRAL SPACE
<i>Resolution</i>	DEPARTURE
<i>Plot</i>	NARRATIVE

and recasts issues of performance and reception in the landscape as inherently time based and subject to the exchange of multiple players and props. If the landscape is an actor, how do we direct it? How do we structure its performance in a way that it is compelling to audiences on return visits, through repeat performances? Just as the performance of a play changes each night with each variation of the actor's inflection and with the shifting moods and personalities of each audience, so too landscapes are experienced in a multiplicity of ways over time. Landscapes, like theater productions, are composed of multiple communicating parts. In the virtuoso performance of a beloved play the actors, the set, the lighting, and the sound combine to surpass any individual part and the effect grips and enthralls the audience, moving them to make the narrative of the play their own. The audience itself plays a significant role in that special night. While the coordination of so many players and effects seems beyond the designer's control, theater productions do not succeed on pure luck. Just as a play can sing, so can a landscape in the hands of an artful designer.

Theater fails to captivate its audience when its parts do not communicate and, instead, distract from each other. Individual effects or performances lose their impact without the support of the whole production. The narrative is lost and the plot becomes difficult to follow. A landscape without direction is not without its pleasures, but the audience is left to invent or decipher their own narratives from what traces they can find. Some will embrace it while many others will pass it by. A well-directed landscape is also subject to the whims of reception, but its parts structure a narrative or narratives that cohesively engage visitors through the inspiration of curiosity. When we search the ground for meaning, the designed landscape can lead us along certain paths or it can deny narrative and leave the writing to us.

The list in table 1 could be extended to encompass every aspect of a landscape and evokes a theatrical view of landscape that gives structure to the design and reception of landscape. Considered theatrically, one begins to consider how a story or stories can be told in the landscape. The parts can be assessed for their contributions to this narrative. However, the metaphor is only useful if the designer applies it to each part of the landscape, allowing each part to play multiple roles. Unlike plays, landscapes are often experienced without specific sequences and rather than drop the metaphor, the designer could instead structure a landscape as a series of interrelated scenes. In a well-directed landscape, the climax of a landscape or the essence of the narrative could be found

almost anywhere depending on a visitor's experience. Depending on season and time of day plants may play leading or supporting roles in a landscape. Rather than suggest that landscapes should be structured exactly like plays, the metaphor of landscape as theater offers the designer a moveable frame through which to consider multiple narratives in the landscape.

A handful of recent works of landscape architecture through the lens of the theatrical will illustrate the productive use of the landscape as theater metaphor I have been schematizing. For each of the three examples that follow, the aim will be to show how narratives can be woven into the landscape and to further explain how each holds the potential to play out these narratives in multiple ways for diverse audiences.

"Dominance of nature was replaced by control of it. Nature as imparted by views and framed like a painting is, however, corrected and dramatised where it seems necessary. The control of nature calls for a plan that decodes the chaos of nature."⁴

The Weather Garden at the Park Hyatt Hotel in Zurich by Vogt Landschaftsarchitekten could also be called the Weather Theater (figures 3–4). Through variation and repetition, Vogt calls attention to the processes of weather: the rain, puddles, evaporation and the clouds reflected above. For Vogt the droplets of water are actors in need of a stage. The stage he has designed engages with the natural cycles to produce an effect that calls out to the viewer.

Georges Descombes, another Swiss landscape architect, describes the focus of his own work as '... revealing forces that are (or have become) imperceptible, for generating a feeling of oddness, creating a source of different attention, a different vision, a different emotion'.⁵ Vogt also sees his work as a medium that 'decodes the chaos of nature'. Everything is there—from the reflected clouds, whence the rains come and to which the puddles return, to the transforming pools of water themselves—all revealed and accentuated through a sculpted surface of stone. The carving of the stone and the use of the grid allow Vogt to direct the water patterns in a way that brings the audience into the picture. The story of rain becomes tangible and evocative through its display on the center stage of the atrium. The narrative that Vogt reveals taps into the memory of the viewer, linking an elemental cycle in the present to a well of experiences with rain and puddles. Like an audience in a theater, every hotel guest is told the same story, but its effect on each will inevitably be personal.



FIGURES 3–4. Video stills of the Weather Garden from above showing the variation in pooling and evaporation. Video Stills: Hugofilm Productions GmbH with permission of Vogt Landscape Architects.

Unlike most landscapes, the Weather Garden cannot be occupied physically by its visitors. Instead the site is visited visually from above, in effect keeping the audience (hotel guests) and the actors (water droplets) in more or less defined roles. But at the Schouwbergplein in Rotterdam by West 8, the roles are more loosely defined allowing visitors to observe and participate in both directed and unfolding narratives.

The Schouwbergplein's adjacency to a theater and the port history of its site are conditions that play out as critical narratives in the design. The raised platform of the square is both a stage and an actor. Through the use of wood and metal planking, West 8 gives the surface the role of evoking the area's past use as a port. They emphasize this story by assigning even more central roles to the massive light cranes, which present an image of the site as an operating landscape of production. This narrative and others are alluded to in the following excerpt from West 8's website:

"The square is designed as an interactive public space, flexible in use, and changing during day and seasons. Its appearance is a reflection the Port of Rotterdam [sic]. By raising the surface of the square above the surrounding area, the void was retained and the 'city's stage' created."⁶

The audience for this port narrative has also been given space and props with which to act out their own narratives on the urban stage. The raised platform is a stage upon which performers can present shows to passersby and the light cranes are operable by visitors to the site allowing for spotlighted impromptu performances. These theatrical elements serve to frame the experience of visitors in a way that suggests an opportunity for meaningful narratives to be performed. The stage has been built at a height so that it can double as a seat affording visitors the opportunity to put their backs to the square and view the theater of the street. The excitement of the square and its openness to appropriation move participants beyond the mundane and everyday actions of city living. The square serves as an invitation to create lasting and meaningful moments. The spotlights and the stage give focus to the present and imbue it with a form that can be remembered.

This activation of moments of public interaction and performance has been acknowledged and emphasized by James Corner, and this kind of public theater plays out in his project for the High Line in Manhattan. What Corner calls the 'spectacle' is apparent in the opportunities that the High Line affords visitors to observe and perform for each other. Like Schouwbergplein, the High Line itself acts as a continuation of its railroad past. The replaced tracks and the planted

ruderal species act out the history of the site in a way that is tangible and framed by the present use. Rather than restore the actual conditions of the High Line, Corner chose to accentuate and dramatize recognizable elements. The narrative of the transformation of infrastructure to public space has been depicted through the elements of the design. The rooms of the design can be seen as acts in a play, and while the sequence of reception is not dictated, they function together to frame a dramatic experience for visitors. Corner directs the landscape in a way that makes the site's history accessible without closing off that narrative as a thing of the past. The High Line is a theater of immersive experiences and seasonal shifts, revealing through abstraction the variety and excitement of the High Line's trespassers and first visionaries.

Corner also casts visitors of the High Line as actors much in the same way that Olmsted did in Central Park's Mall. In contrast to the streets below, the stage of the High Line has been lined in places with seating. The High Line frequently functions as both stage and seating for an audience. Exhibitionists in the Standard Hotel perform for the public on the High Line. Fashion houses stage photo shoots with the High Line as the backdrop. Billboards poke up from the street, giving visitors behind-the-scenes views of these commercial actors. This theatricality of performing and observing is clarified even more in the construction of the 10th Avenue Square. The amphitheater seating descends to a framed view of 10th Avenue below. This vantage and frame give form and definition to the life of the street below. The frame works the other way as well inviting people below to look up to the watchers on display behind the glass (figure 5).

With the High Line, Corner engages the materials and continuous experience of this infrastructural remnant, and sets up a new form of urban theater (much as Laurie Olin did with his re-imagining of the neglected traffic circle of Columbus Circle, transforming it into a vibrant public display and gathering place). This construction of a theatrical space and experience redirects the history of both the High Line and the city around it. As a writer of history, Corner edits and amplifies conditions that speak to visitors of the site and recasts the High Line as an actor in the civic narrative of the city.

History as theater

"Your Honour's players . . . Are come to play a pleasant Comedie . . . It is a kind of history."⁷



FIGURE 5. *High Line, New York (Photo: Iwan Baan.).*

Both history and theater are the framing and formalization of a narrative. It is well understood that every history has a writer and that histories are necessarily selective. Histories also require readers. If we allow ourselves to see the writing of histories as a creative act that frames our current situation in the context of what has come before, the comparison to theater is not a great stretch. The narrative that the historian gathers through research and deciphers or distills into history is much like the plot of a play. Indeed as J. B. Jackson points out, early theater in seventeenth-century Italy consisted largely of historical plays that recreated scenes from the past.⁸ In fact, as evidenced in the words of Shakespeare above, history was simply another word for a play. Written histories and acted histories involve the framing of narratives perceived to be meaningful by the writer. In the Weather Garden, Günther Vogt chose to formalize the meteorological narratives of water. This is both a form of theater and history writing. A similar act of history writing and theater production occurred when James Corner chose to tell the story of the High Line's use as a railroad and overgrowth into an urban ruin.

Both history and theater identify essential actors and actions, and address an audience. Both histories and theater productions require the description of specific events. A history is not something that merely happens; it is the analysis and formalization of that event. Historians designate the essential components of an event: who did it, what they did, when they did it, and where it was done. Obviously this is a simplification of the historian's role, but history is inherently an essentialist activity. From the mess and chaos of events, historians attempt to decipher what matters and what should be told. Similarly, plays serve as an abstraction of events. Actors and sets work to evoke feelings and events beyond the motions and words performed on stage. Clearly this is Vogt's aim as well.

Both history and theater play out over time and exist between creation and reception. The audiences of plays and the readers of history are presented with actors and actions, but in the end it is through reception that meanings and narratives are imparted. The situation is much the same when we engage a landscape. We live in a fragmented society justifiably

suspicious of totalizing narratives that have proven fallible, but the formalization of narratives on a site may still allow us to more fully engage with traces of the past on a site. As long as the framing is not exclusive and instead is allowed to play out over time, multiple narratives can be opened up and incorporated.

Traces of the past

"If we reject the possibility of mediating narratives altogether this is not the liberating experience that it may appear. On the contrary, it is profoundly oppressive. The reason is that without narrative we risk two things. First of all we undermine the key element of human solidarity (we bond together by sharing stories) and second we are trapped in the immediacy of the present."⁹

While we live in a heterogeneous and multi-cultural world, history and formalized narrative in landscape serve to connect us to places and others around us. Just as the writing of history is complicated by this multiplicity, it can be difficult to select a narrative to structure a site. However, it is through site histories that designers can allow people to more fully engage with traces of the past in a place and can open up questions about other narratives. If curiosity is piqued and the structure of narration is there, we will search for a meaning in the traces and construct our own histories of landscapes. In many cases, history in landscape can resonate across cultures because natural forces transcend societal boundaries as in Vogt's Weather Garden.

Histories can be misinterpreted and appropriated. A story's meaning in reception depends on the viewer, but framing of that narrative can be just as critical. Considering landscapes in theatrical terms can be a productive method for the framing and evocation of narratives. If we consider landscape in these terms it can be a medium for story-telling regardless of the unpredictability of reception.

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NOTES

1. Jackson, John Brinckerhoff. 'Landscape as Theater', *The Necessity for Ruins* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p. 67.
2. Marot, Sebastien. *Suburbanism and the Art of Memory* (London: Architectural Association, 2003), p. 32, drawing on Freud's image of Rome in *Civilization and its Discontents*.
3. Hunt, John Dixon. *William Kent, Landscape garden designer* (New York: A. Zwemmer Ltd., 1987), p. 32.
4. Vogt, Günther. 'Searching in the Fog', *Miniature and Panorama* (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2006), p. 360.
5. Descombes, Georges. 'Shifting Sites . . .' in *Recovering Landscape. Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture*, ed. Corner, James (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), p. 79.
6. <http://www.west8.nl>.
7. Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, Induction. II, lines 129–130 and 140.
8. Jackson, John Brinckerhoff. 'Landscape as Theater', p. 69.
9. Sheldrake, Phillip. 'A Sense of Place' in *Spaces for the Sacred. Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 2–25.