



Meaning and design of nature for the urban built environment

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The role of nature in aesthetic values: globalisation and westernisation of the urban environment

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The process of British colonisation of the 18th and 19th centuries was an early phase of a type of aesthetic globalisation. Although at that time limited to the colonies of the British Empire, the dominant aesthetic formula of the Picturesque has become pervasive on a global level.

The aesthetic conventions of the Picturesque were grounded within particular landscape types, the cultured nature of Europe, with the emblematic elements of oak forests, green pasturelands and urban landscapes with familiar patterns of built form and vernacular architecture. Consequently the encounters between the imported aesthetic and the new lands with their very different ecological and cultural contexts was a point of tension.

The broad process of land transformation changed the appearance of the colonised landscapes, many native ecosystems disappeared forever, and were replaced by rural and urban landscapes that represented the influences of the European aesthetic ideals of beauty. The most desirable landscapes were “Picturesque” pasturelands and urban parks with extensive emerald lawns, willow-lined streams, populated with imported swans and ducks. The overlay of the Gardenesque was expressed through the complicated flowerbeds and the tidy carpet of the manicured lawn. These landscape were almost exclusively composed of exotic plants – an irony considering that at the same time plants such as the Cabbage Tree formed curious centre-pieces in the gardens of Victorian England. This exotic, European version of biota came to be seen as the epitome of Nature in the City. Front and back lawns, specimen trees, and manicured flowerbeds became the dominant components of “green open space” or pieces of nature.

Today, the free-market forces have continued the process of homogenisation which was initiated by the “colonies of Empire” and has resulted in the process of globalisation and particularly westernisation. More importantly it is the Western ideological imperialism which drives the spread of a westernised vision of “nature”. This process is especially visible in new urban landscapes of the developed world, with the impetus of the colonising nations in “shaping” the vision of “beautiful” nature now almost finalised. The lawn, rooted in the European native meadow, the “picturesque” urban parks and gardens with scattered trees, and the brightly coloured flowerbeds are potent symbols in the westernised cities of the world, and have become a generic type of “natural” landscape. Local, indigenous versions of nature were largely suppressed, and many debates over planting philosophies signal this tension.

Climatic variations are one of the key influences on a city’s aesthetic. Global tropical and subtropical visions of the “nature paradise” are emerging. Today’s world becomes abbreviated via the unified planting design and architectural languages, disseminated by the popular media, and witnessed by such elided design expressions as “Bali style” which has reduced much of the regional and local variety within South East Asia. Plants are playing a key role in the process of the globalisation of landscapes.

Nevertheless, over the last decade there have been strong movements in different countries toward an appreciation of the beauty of aboriginal native landscapes and the active incorporation of the associated aesthetic and ecological values into urban landscapes, via ideals such as native biodiversity. The task is not only to appreciate the native landscape and use indigenous plants or motifs from the traditional regional gardens, but to actively use them in creating new diverse landscapes which will reflect natural and cultural identity.

European countries as the originators of the most pervasive visions of “nature” have had less to overcome in terms of establishing nature in the city. The forms and familiarity of plants and landscape expressions make it easier to recreate nature in urban landscapes. The majority of plants and aboriginal species have advantages and opportunities, such as seed banks, in contrast to the challenges of introduced plants. Other countries have to establish a new way to create a new vision of Nature in the City, as the current urban “nature” is so absolutely foreign from an ecological point of view, and repressive in an aesthetic sense.