

Nature Culture

Kathryn Moore

Landscape is not only the physical context, the constructed public realm, the national parks, coastlines, squares, promenades and streets, places to walk or sit and watch the world go by; it also reflects our memories and values, the experiences we have of a place—as citizens, employers, visitors, students, tourists. It is the material, cultural, and social context of our lives.

This perspective demands that we redefine nature and overcome the dichotomy that has traditionally severed it from culture. This damaging duality lends it an almost mystical status and is one of the foremost reasons why the landscape continues to be associated with technology rather than ideas. But what exactly do we mean by nature? Why do we think "nature" is good for us, if by nature we mean the green stuff, the things that grow? Ask your average urbanite what is meant by nature in the city, for example, and he will mention trees, urban foxes, and rats, not necessarily in that order and not all inherently good for our souls. Is our supposed fondness for nature something we share culturally or even universally, as many would have us believe, its efficacy and value a matter of fact, beyond question or debate? To save the planet, is it a matter of scientific necessity to find out all there is to know about it? Should it be left to itself or tweaked and tampered with to suit our purpose? Neglect a garden and you get weeds; allow woodland to develop and you get biodiversity. Nature is what we make of it. The problem is that in the city, nature (landscape, "the green stuff"—call it what you will) is an afterthought, the trees and shrubs to be imported and manicured once the architects have left the building.

To be coldly objective and scientific or airily metaphysical about nature does considerable disservice to the very concept. Both views isolate it from the broader perspective, dislocating it from culture, cost, value, and profit. Reducing nature to natural systems and the like gives the impression that it can simply be detached from strategic and spatial decision-making. Easy to marginalize, it is left out of the frame, hard to justify, difficult to substantiate, compromised on after the event rather than considered from the start. And we've all seen the results. Relegated to hard-won square meters of grass, trees,

MEASURE

468

hedgerows, and ditches, "nature" is sandwiched in after the important objective economic decisions have been made, fitted neatly between settlements and roads, usually along the streams, rivers, or corners of parks or "informal green spaces"—nothing more than living embroidery. Nature seen like this is often cynically assumed to be enough to address matters of quality, and green space is justified in terms of its benefit for wildlife. Never mind the spatial structure of the constructed public realm, the ease of movement, the sense of belonging, the cultural identity of the place or the social and physical experience of the people who live and work in the places we design. No matter how much spirituality hovers around the concept of nature, in reality we find it difficult not to associate it with technology. It is critical in the wider arena to stop dividing things into bite-sized pieces, be they

The master plan for the gardens evolved from an initial study of the organization and physiology of the orchid to a highly sophisticated and integrated 3D network of horticulture, art engineering, and architecture.

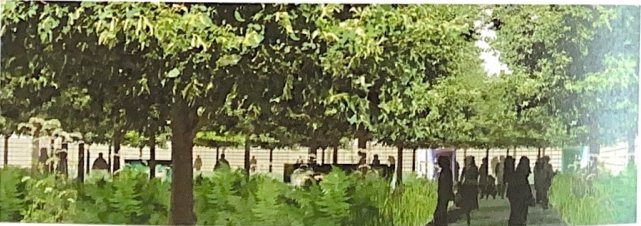


469

biological or cultural, of scientific or artistic concern. This means ditching both narrowly scientific and wildly subjective approaches to nature.

Rather than ideas versus nature, we have ideas of nature. Instead of seeing nature as something separate from culture, from ourselves, we must recognize that in the way we live our lives, with every intervention we make, we are expressing (consciously or not) an attitude toward the physical world. The choice is not whether we work with art or ecology, with nature or culture, but how considerably, imaginatively, and responsibly we go about our business, because for every one of our actions there is a reaction in the physical world. Where we decide to build new cities or expand old ones, and place streets, squares, parks, and gardens, reflects the value we place on the quality of our physical environment. Working with natural processes, given the global challenges we face, is an ecological imperative. We have no choice in the matter. But it is the whole thing, the ideas and values we hold and their expression in physical form, be it green, gray, or blue, that defines us. This is what frames the experience we all have of the places we live in, and it is this experience that is a properly relevant definition of nature. After all, natural systems don't stop where the buildings start.

The Lovers' Wood, British Pavilion Garden, Japan Expo 2005. An illuminated, changing woodland flora garden enclosed by lime, sequentially planted with lime, ferns, and grasses beneath the changing canopy.



The ideas we have about the landscape are a talking point as well as an explanation that empowers the clients, the community, and the various professions. Ideas can be cohesive; they bind all manner of things—argument, opinion, values. There can be no better way to capture the hearts and minds of everyone involved than a great idea.

What we are examining today are ways to provide a sustainable and lasting blueprint for the landscape—to give a fresh perspective, not simply reinforce existing practices. We must connect spatial strategies to real places and develop ways of working that encourage and demand the expression of the ideas that are fundamental to achieving design excellence, the ability to create good-looking places, because the quality of our environment is directly proportional to the quality of our lives. It's an equation as simple as it is compelling.

At the heart of the gardens are the Supertrees—a fusion of nature, art, and technology. The spectacular vertical tropical gardens feature ferns, orchids, and climbers as well as environmental engines for the gardens, equipped with photovoltaics, solar thermal collectors, rainwater harvesting devices, and venting ducts.

