



BRUCE SHARKY

Thinking about Landscape Architecture

Principles of a Design Profession for the 21st Century

THINKING ABOUT LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

PRINCIPLES OF A DESIGN
PROFESSION FOR THE
21ST CENTURY

BRUCE SHARKY

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PREFACE

The job of the artist is to go to the edge and report back.

Yo-yo Ma¹

When thinking about landscape architecture, gardens are often what first comes to mind for most people. Garden design certainly engages the professional practice of many landscape architects. A garden is thought of as a place of beauty, simplicity, and pleasure. The Greeks referred to such a place as Arcadia, an idealized bucolic setting, a place to write poetry and consider philosophical questions. *Locus amoenus* is the Latin phrase with a similar meaning as a pleasant rural or garden setting offering one a place of comfort and to enjoy beauty. The idealized garden of the Greeks and Romans was seen as a safe place where one could enter to attain a sense of well-being. A garden setting had overtones of regenerative powers for healing as in caring for one's body and soul. We will learn in the following chapters that the ancient ideals of a garden were the genesis of contemporary landscape architecture. We will also explore what it means to be a landscape architect in the twenty-first century and the place in the world for this young and robust creative profession. We will also learn that the regenerative powers ancient cultures attributed to gardens now engage the creative work of today's landscape architects. This work involves the regeneration of damaged landscapes, responding to the impact of global issues such as sea-level rise, and rebuilding derelict urban neighborhoods and transforming them into more livable and walkable communities.

Thinking about Landscape Architecture is intended for several audiences. It was written for a general audience curious about the profession and the nature of what a landscape architect does. This audience might be considering hiring someone with capabilities appropriate for a potential project, considering that a landscape architect would be the appropriate profession to seek professional advice. This audience may have heard of the profession while researching possible design consultants. This audience would feel confident in knowing what to expect when hiring a landscape architect and be able to ask good questions before hiring after reading this book. A second audience consists of two groups of students. The first group has already enrolled in the major at a university and is taking an introductory course where a text such as *Thinking about Landscape Architecture* has been assigned by the faculty. As a text, it would provide these students with a well-rounded understanding of the broad-ranging facets of the profession they have embarked upon. The second group of students is one researching potential majors with landscape architecture being one of perhaps several possibilities. This group is seeking more in-depth information than might be available from a career counselor or popular publication so as to make an informed career decision.

Someone who has had a productive, fulfilling, and varied career in the profession wrote this book. I, the author, initially chose chemistry

as my major upon entering the university as a freshman at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). At the end of the second year I decided to change majors, having researched many possibilities that included landscape architecture. I proceeded with the paperwork transferring to the University of California at Berkeley where I would be able to study and earn a bachelor's degree in landscape architecture. After graduation followed by a year of travel by land in Latin America, and completing my apprenticeship years in the profession, I returned for advanced studies to earn an MLA degree with an emphasis on regional and coastal resource planning. My career has included working for private landscape architecture consultants in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Winnipeg; a position as a park planner for a city park department; and as a researcher in the lieutenant governor's office at the state level. A brief stint working with an NGO in California involved lobbying activities associated with the passage of landmark coastal management planning legislation establishing the California Coastal Planning Commission. I also worked as a landscape architect for a consortium of oil companies, planning and implementing a landscape restoration program along an 860-mile-long oil pipeline corridor across the State of Alaska. My academic experience has included several North American universities including California State Polytechnic University-Pomona and my current tenure at Louisiana State University as well as shorter periods as a visiting scholar at international universities including Mexico, Portugal, Chile, Japan, Israel, and most recently in China. I established with a partner and long-time friend a successful landscape architecture consulting practice in Alaska, that included the design and overseeing construction of over 200 parks, numerous school campuses, office parks, government facilities, and urban design projects in nearly every corner of the state. I currently teach studio design as well as a sequence in the landscape technology stream at the graduate and undergraduate levels in the Robert Reich School of Landscape Architecture at Louisiana State University.

This breadth and depth of my experience in the profession have prepared me to write *Thinking about Landscape Architecture*. I believe the perspective that I bring should provide the reader with a sound and comprehensive understanding of the profession. While the experience described above is primarily North American, international teaching and travel augment my understanding of the profession, giving it an international grounding. While requirements for preparing and entering the profession may vary by country and continent, there is near uniformity in what landscape architects do, the services they perform, and the theoretical and practical basis of their work, regardless of the country. Stewardship, working in harmony with nature, and incorporating human needs are basic values that guide the professional practice of landscape architects worldwide.

Note

- 1 Barry Mazur, *Imagining Numbers* (Picador, New York, 2003), p. 6.

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Images and photographs from third-party sources are referenced in their respective figure captions. All other photographs are those of the author.

Early on, *Principles of Landscape Design* was the working title for this book project. The more I thought about the title and what motivated me to start this project in the first place, the more it had to do with providing students with an understanding of the potential of the profession beyond the mere basics. I considered what made landscape architecture special and unique among the design professions, believing that it was a profession for the twenty-first century.

The world we have inherited with its many challenges requires a special breed of designers—problem-solvers—who are uniquely prepared to make significant contributions to solving the environmental problems in the world we are facing nowadays. The aim of this book is much more than a source to inform people considering landscape architecture as a possible career choice. It is meant for people who wish to make a difference in their lives, in the lives of others, and for the sustainable preservation of the environment through design. It seems the current title better suggests the story that follows, beginning with the first chapter.

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT?

Landscape architecture is one of those little-known professions with a substantial legacy of extant built works that have added value and beauty to cities and regions throughout the world. This legacy has included parks, gardens, college campuses, greenway systems, and all manner of designed places where people live, work, and recreate. The aim of this book is to present a window onto the world of landscape architects and the principles that inform their work in designing the outdoor places and environments we enjoy and pass through during our daily routine. The chapters are liberally sprinkled with photographs of significant projects designed by international and award-winning practitioners. The landscape architects of these works have incorporated ecological and design principles that are infused and informed by cultural and historical considerations to create built works following the highest design standards. Many visitors have admired and enjoyed this work without knowing whose hand was responsible for their creation. The reader will also come to realize that the knowledge, skills, and experience of landscape architects have prepared them as credible participants in seeking solutions for some of the significant environmental issues of the twenty-first century. These issues include diminishing water sources and water quality, global warming, loss of biodiversity, human health and quality of life issues in urban areas. Landscape architects have a growing voice, while working at the table with others in creating strategies to solve these and other issues affecting the quality and the very survival of life on this planet.

The target audience for this book is university students enrolled in the early landscape architecture design courses, students taking a university survey course from a menu of general study courses, and for those considering landscape architecture as a career choice who want to know more in order to make an informed decision. The students in Figure 1.1 are midway through their landscape architectural curriculum towards earning a Bachelor of Landscape Architecture degree. The group represents the diversity of students who are attracted to the profession, including international representation.