

# Landscape Aesthetics for Sustainable Architecture

DANIEL JAUSLIN

PHD CANDIDATE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE, TU DELFT

**No, No and No.** Three times No is the answer to the question: is there currently such a thing as aesthetics in sustainable architecture? This answer is drawn from the discussions of three architects who are acclaimed practitioners and thinkers in the field. If we assume that aesthetics is something that all architects pursue in one form or another, it would appear that, currently, sustainability is not an integral part of it.

One of the acclaimed architects considered in this chapter is Rem Koolhaas, a Pritzker laureate and one of the founders of OMA, a highly regarded practice in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He opened his keynote lecture at a Harvard University conference on sustainability in 2009 with the following statement:

"I did not assume that anyone in the academic world would ask a practicing architect in the 21st century, given the architecture that we collectively produce, to participate in a conference on ecological urbanism."<sup>1</sup>

During his lecture, Koolhaas showed a photomontage of a massive wall of skyscrapers set in the desert, including some of OMA's own designs (Fig. 1). If we asked Koolhaas the hypothetical question: 'Does the aesthetics of architecture contribute to a sustainable world and its ecology?' He might answer: 'No. Architecture is rarely sustainable as a human activity.'

The second acclaimed architect considered in this chapter is Peter Eisenman. During the Eisenman + Wigley IV lecture at Columbia University in 2009, he made the following statement regarding the US Green Building Council's rating system<sup>2</sup> while discussing the meaning of architectural practice in the context of the current financial crisis:

"Some of the worst buildings I have seen have Gold, Silver or Platinum LEED Certificates ... and they are awful, architecturally. They are depressing ... They may optimize ecological constraints today but they don't do anything for the culture in terms of the excess required for architecture ... Architecture has always been about an environmentally possible way of being. Hence the buildings that last throughout the history of architecture."<sup>3</sup>

Although Eisenman might agree that great pieces of architecture – the kind that last for centuries – possess certain aesthetic qualities, if we asked him the hypothetical question: 'Does sustainable architecture possess durable aesthetics?' Eisenman might answer: 'No. Sustainable buildings do not possess lasting aesthetics.'

The third acclaimed architect considered here is Wolf Prix, co-founder of the Coop Himmelb(l)au in Vienna (Fig. 2). He presented a striking statement during the opening lecture for the 2009 Münchner Opernfestspiele (Munich Opera Festival):

"Sustainability belies signification – and it is therefore not possible to generate 'aesthetics' from the term sustainability. There is no such living aesthetics of sustainability as that of modernist architecture."<sup>4,5</sup>

This statement led to a major uproar among German Architects and a policy debate or 'die Grundsatzdebatte' in the prominent German newspaper, Die Süddeutsche Zeitung.<sup>6</sup> If we asked Prix the hypothetical question: 'Is there such thing as aesthetics in sustainable architecture?' He might answer: 'No. By definition, there cannot be.'

To summarize current debates on the aesthetic possibilities of sustainability in architecture, we may conclude that today, there is no consensus as to what these possibilities are or whether they exist at all. At least this is the conclusion that may be drawn from the unauthorized summaries of three of the most prominent architects in the field. Their remarks



Figure 1: Collage for Lecture R. Koolhaas Sustainability: advancement vs. apocalypse (OMA 2009)



Figure 2: Wolf D. Prix with significant architecture, dress and accessoires (Photo:AP ddp)



Figure 3: Minimum Impact House Frankfurt (2004-2008) Photo: Drexler Guinand Jauslin Architects

are quite recent – made within the past few years – and quite behind schedule if we consider that sustainability has grown to become a firmly established and often compelling issue in the fields of science and politics over the past two decades.

On a wider scale, the United Nations committed itself to the goal of sustainable development and environmental protection on a global scale when it passed Resolution 38/161 in 1987. In the process, the UN established its own definition for sustainable development:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."<sup>7</sup>

One decade later, the Kyoto Protocols<sup>8</sup> established energy efficiency as an important policy agenda of many of the UN member states. While definitions of sustainable development and energy efficiency were established at the level of international policy making more than 20 years ago, it seems that on the whole, the profession of architecture still disregards the impact of sustainable development, while failing to connect the notion of sustainability to the notion of aesthetics.

As a practicing architect, it is clear that these problems may stem from the fact that environmental destruction does not appear to be a matter that can be ameliorated or resolved through architectural aesthetics. And in fact, that addressing environmental destruction would curtail aesthetic possibilities. For many architects, sustainable design has become an issue not because it is integral to their own desires for aesthetic experimentation or development, but because of the new legalities imposed by building regulations and the economic ramifi-

cations of the real estate market. As of 2011/2012, we could say that current architecture is not willing to meet the challenges of sustainable development, environmental protection and energy efficiency in a proactive manner, given the widespread assumption of the substantial aesthetic compromises that would be required to do so.

In order to advance the cause of environmental consciousness in architecture, what appears necessary is neither an exclusive commitment to sustainability nor a commitment to another avant-garde aesthetic. However, playing up the polemics of opposition between sustainability and the avant-garde will not lead to a resolution. Rather, a renewed environmental consciousness may be triggered with an aesthetic sensitivity toward the natural environment that provides the context for each piece of architecture, developed in tandem with a wider understanding of the human dimensions and aesthetic qualities implemented in the built environment.

A very different way of dealing with the polarity of nature and culture can be seen in the perspective of landscape. German art theorist and activist Bazon Brock defines landscape as the aesthetic human appropriation of nature.<sup>9</sup> The role of aesthetics in landscape is not to separate natural forms from the cultural realm, but to reconnect them. Drawing inspiration from the inherent terms of aesthetics in landscape, the architectural discipline could develop a real alternative to the invasive practice of architecture where the dichotomy of nature and culture is profound. With inspiration from the landscape perspective, it may be possible to shift the position and approach of



Figure 4: Grin Grin Park with Visitor's Centre by Toyo Ito in Fukuoka (2002-2005) Photo by author, 2010

architecture toward nature, moving from an approach of opposition to one of integration. Such a renewal is clearly outside the scope and potential of avant-garde aesthetics alone.

A common recognition of where our efforts should lead in terms of environmental consciousness seems to be absent from the education, socialization and profession of architecture. In fact, the question of how a building, city or landscape will be perceived by its users and inhabitants is the key question that underlies most of our design work. Designs that please human perception tend to trump the consideration of the natural environment. However, no matter which side of the discourse they fall on, most architects agree that architecture should contain certain aesthetics, and most decision makers agree that finding a sense of sustainability is a prerequisite of any planning or architectural activity. But the relation between these two priorities – aesthetics and sustainability – changes according to the theoretical and practical views of different actors in the process of building.

The landscape perspective may be able to unite the seeming dichotomies of nature versus culture and aesthetics versus sustainability, showing that these dichotomies do not have to reside at the core of the discipline. Already, some practitioners of contemporary architecture have been strongly influenced by the concept of landscape. In 1966, Vittorio Gregotti postulated that architects should focus on territories rather than architectural space.<sup>10</sup> And since the late 1980's, architects have developed a wide range of process-

oriented approaches to architectural design that include cartographic methods such as mapping, and surface-oriented methods such as folding. These methods expanded beyond the academic circles and into professional practice during the 1990's. Although most of these methods took compositional and philosophical detours and do not implement a purely territorial approach, they are fundamental to a consciousness that is changing the discipline in significant ways: a consciousness that views the organization and composition of architectural space as landscape.

Concomitant with this rise in landscape-oriented consciousness is a research framework that can be characterized as the 'architecture of landscape methods,'<sup>11</sup> developed to investigate and understand architecture that has been designed as landscape. Within this research framework, the interior volume of a building and the exterior landscape surface surrounding a building do not merely interact.

Instead, the building is designed as an artificial landscape, as a continuation and augmentation of the natural one. This idea of landscape defines the exterior surfaces as well as the interior surfaces, and through these methods, the relation of landscape to architecture is in fact turned inside out.

A specific focus of landscape architecture is placed on understanding the formative elements and qualities implicit in the landscape, and on developing architectural design methods and strategies in consideration of them. With the implementation of this approach, landscape architecture consists of a range of

natural, cultural, urban and architectonic constituents.<sup>12</sup> There is an obvious correlation between content and form: the location where the content resides is what connects the landscape to the architectonic in terms of material, topographic, technical, cultural and economic substance. Form involves the way in which the elements are assembled into a composition, based on the development of a variable but intimate relationship between object and context.<sup>13, 14</sup>

In this way, the modalities of landscape architecture are employed in the design of architectonic constructs, in order to formulate a set of design tools that are appropriate to the challenges of designing the built environment in relation to the natural one. The idea of landscape in fact defines an aesthetic mediation between the natural and artificial worlds.

The design methods of landscape architecture are particularly useful; they can be contrasted to architecture in terms of how they strategically approach spatial design. While most pieces of architecture carry a distinct building program forward from the outset of the design work, landscape approaches start from the topography of the site.

Developing the aesthetics of sustainable architecture is necessary. It is probably the only path left in the future of architecture – aside from the complete absence thereof – that can begin to address the impacts of providing architecture and infrastructure to the world's population of 7 billion. Designing for sustainability is a unique opportunity. It does not indicate the end of architecture as an aesthetic system, nor does it indicate an



Figure 5: Villa VPRO by MVRDV in Hilversum (1993-1998), Photo by author



Figure 6: Yokohama Ferry Terminal by FOA (1995-2002), Photo by author, 2010

imposition on architecture's creative enterprise. In fact, designing for sustainability is an aesthetic project at its heart, where aesthetic systems can be used to form a symbiotic relationship between the city and its surroundings. If we understand architecture as part of the topological space of landscape, we will also be able to understand our place within the relational system between the natural and built environments. This new approach cultivates an understanding of landscape as a human interface with nature, presenting a means by which to design architecture in a sustainable manner, along with a renewed context of sustainable aesthetics. If we cultivate our spatial relationship to the environment as both a design method and a context, we will be able to gain a much wider understanding of architecture in terms of its range and scale, thereby reclaiming the responsibility for its programmatic and contextual correlations as a discipline.

In a sense, architecture practiced as a landscape method will be closer to an art form more than to a technological accomplishment, and indeed, "Yes" will be the certain answer to the question: is there such a thing as aesthetics of sustainable architecture?

This article is abbreviated from a chapter in:

Sang Lee (Ed.) *Aesthetics of Sustainable Architecture*, Rotterdam (010) 2011.

Order at <http://www.010.nl> or support your local bookstore ISBN 978 90 6450 752 6

The purpose of Sang Lee's book is to reveal, explore and further the debate on the aesthetic potentials of sustainable architecture and its practice. "Aesthetics of Sustainable Architecture" opens a new area of scholarship and discourse in the design and production of sustainable architecture, one that is based in aesthetics. The chapters in this book have been compiled from architects and scholars working in diverse research and practice areas in North America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. While they approach the subject matter from different angles, the chapters of the book help clarify the key principles behind environmental concerns and sustainability in architecture. At its very core, *Aesthetics of Sustainable Architecture* underlines the connection that exists between our approach to the environment and sustainability on one hand, and our approach to certain aesthetic propositions and practices on the other.

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- 2 See the USGBC Leadership for Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System (TM), 2007. Available at: <http://www.usgbc.org/LEED> (accessed April 2011).
- 3 Peter Eisenman and Mark Wigley, In *Dialogue Eisenman + Wigley VI* (New York: GSAPP Columbia University, 7.7.2009) Transcript of lecture from iTunesU.
- 4 'Nachhaltigkeit verleugnet Zeichenhaftigkeit – und daher ist es nicht möglich, aus dem Begriff Nachhaltigkeit "Ästhetik" zu generieren. Eine lebendige Ästhetik der Nachhaltigkeit gibt es nicht.' Translation by the author, original German text courtesy of Coop Himmelb(l)au.
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