Form, Meaning, and Expression in Landscape Architecture

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Abstract

This essay develops the thesis that the range in landscape design forms derives, directly or indirectly, from nature and its processes, often translated through a series of abstractions and artistic expressions. Limitations upon the range and diversity of forms created have resulted largely from cultural norms. Recent projects seeking to expand the choice of formal structure, materials, palette, and expression, including intended meaning, are examined and compared to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century works of Brown and LeNôtre, which are found to be more successful in their transformation of preexisting prototypes, first as abstractions from nature and second in the tradition of devices used to invest meaning. Despite a perceived tension between the evolutionary tendency of art to renew itself through change and transformation, and the general accessibility of works which is very much dependent upon their normative properties, the greatest examples of design in the field accommodate both needs. Devices which can combine to create meaning and characterize style are considered in works of the nineteenth century (Olmsted) and twentieth century (Haag, Halprin). The conclusion affirms the centrality of metaphoric device and concern for natural process in the creation of work that eschews literal imitation of nature, but rather strives for understanding and emulation, informed by consideration of the history of endeavors to do so.

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