

Those who can, do ... Writing about Landscape Architecture

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Once, when the renowned landscape architect Dieter Kienast was asked by students of architecture: what is the most valuable contribution of a landscape architect to the advancement of garden culture and contemporary landscape architecture, the Swiss Professor answered in his typically short and precise way: “Realize good projects or write excellent books!” The students were amazed about this answer, because right from the beginning of their professional education they were told, that a really important architect must build – absolutely. They were persuaded to believe, that an architect could only prove his professional capabilities by building. Should this possibly be really different in landscape architecture? Why should one just write books about landscape architecture if one seemingly owns all necessary capacities and skills to design gardens, parks and plazas and to transform these projects into built reality?

Dieter Kienast not only owned an extensive private library with thousands of books on garden art and landscape architecture, but he also attached great importance to publishing his own successful landscape architectural work in a series of books. He watched the genesis of his first book „Kienast Gärten Gardens“¹, which appeared in 1997, with great personal dedication. Shortly after the book was published the landscape architect suddenly died in December 1998, at the age of 53, by a severe illness. It is not at all by chance that Kienast asked Brigitte Wormbs to write a preface for his first book, entitled „Diction and Contradiction. Ways of reading history and tales“. In this text the author and studied landscape architect explores the fascinating relation between writing and garden, text and landscape, literature and garden art in which Dieter Kienast was particularly interested. Kienast was convinced at that time that „to a large extent, the crisis of recent garden architecture is based on the fact that we are so terribly purposeful and leave the question of reason and sense to the proven care of the old philology“. The Swiss landscape architect was absolutely sure, that there can be no successful future development of garden art and landscape architecture without permanent, consistent and well-founded work to build up and reinforce the theoretical base of our profession.

Fortunately, in the last decade we have seen a clear increase in German-speaking publications about landscape architecture, even though there were a lot more books published in the same period of time on architecture. Professional organizations like the BDLA as well as many practising landscape architects have recognized during the past years increasingly – even not yet in sufficient extent – how important it is, to communicate via publication with professionals of neighbouring disciplines as well as with the general audience about landscape architecture.

Those experts with enough self-confidence and an appreciable built oeuvre do not only show their work on nicely designed webpages in the internet, on flashy flyers and brochures, but they decide to publish books. Books in which the purely descriptive approach to their work with many coloured pictures does not stand in the centre, but the reflected discussion with principle questions of today's landscape architecture. “Moving Horizons”², the book by Jane Amidon about the work of Kathryn Gustafson is such an example. Unfortunately, publications

like this, well founded in their content, still do not get published often enough. However, these publications do offer intelligent access to contemporary landscape architecture for an interested audience, and ideally such books are even valuable sources for the enhancement of the theoretical bases in landscape architecture. Of course you do not conquer popular bestseller lists with such publications, because they seldom meet the popular taste, which is fixed mainly on attractive illustrated books about decorative garden design.

Why is it, that only so few trend-setting books about landscape architecture are published, above all in comparison to the architecture? At first sight the explanation seems to be that theory and history of architecture has a lot longer scientific tradition than in landscape architecture. Also the number of professional authors publishing today in the architecture exceeds by far that in the landscape architecture. This landscape architect Constanze Petrow recently finished her doctoral thesis entitled „Dialogue with the Public. Critique on Contemporary Landscape Architecture”³. In her dissertation, Petrow studied the reasons why there is such a poor response on landscape architectural issues in the daily press and she gathered important data for a better understanding of this situation. First of all, a stunningly easy explanation for the poor print media coverage is the fact that there is too few versed authors, capable of writing competently about topics in landscape architecture. One reason for this misery lies in the already mentioned preference for building instead of writing in our practically oriented profession – or as the populist and cynical saying goes: "Those who can, do; those who can't, write."

As a matter of fact the design of a project and the writing of a complex text have much more common characteristics in various regards than one may suppose at first sight. „The spoken word as the first concretion of first ideas and conceptions is absolutely the most ephemeral of all design tools“, says Christian Gänshirt in his book “Tools for Ideas”⁴. He points out that the German word "reißen" in the sense "drawing" comes from the same root as the English term "to write". However, the analogies between writing and designing reach a lot further, even without pointing at the complicated connections between structuralism in linguistics and structuralism in landscape architecture – a subject of high significance for current planning issues⁵.

Writing is designing, or at least writing is an excellent design training, because it forces the author give a clear structure to a story told or an image of a new garden or a landscape created in a creative design process. Every new image of a garden, every new landscape idea originates, as we all know, from first images in the head of the viewer or the designer, and they need to be translated in communicable signs. Unfortunately this is leading today to an almost intolerable flood of so-called reference images, while the linguistic capabilities of expression verifiably decline.

How many gardens and parks, however, have been discovered books and texts, before they were built in reality! One look into the history of the garden art, possibly into the history of the English landscape garden is enough to understand quickly that this exceedingly successful garden type had already been invented in literature and painting, before he was actually realised for the first time by the poet Alexander Pope at the beginning of the 18th century. The list of truly influential books and writings in garden art and landscape architecture, from the letters of Pliny in the first century to the writings of Leberecht Migge on garden culture at the beginning of the 20th century up to Lucius Burckhardts keen remarks about the garden art of our time is absolutely impressive and regularly leads to a search for the most important books in contemporary landscape architecture.

The last search of this type was launched by the Journal of Landscape Architecture⁶ (JoLA) 2008, leading to an extremely vague result. The complexity of landscape-architectural questions has properly exploded in the late 20th century and cannot be mastered any more by only one single profession. Therefore, the range of the reading recommendations in the Journal of Landscape Architecture encloses all kinds of books, from novel up to the sociological studies, but the least ones of the recommended books deal with landscape architecture or garden culture in the narrower sense. Even though we do appreciate the impulse to look beyond the edge of the plate of our own profession, this outcome cannot be satisfying.

Writing a book, provided it is not only an encyclopaedic reference book, always requires the clear and interesting narration of a story. At the same time it's a fascinating chance to develop an idea, to create a new design, a project not existing in reality yet. A really good book can be like the path, leading you through a landscape or a park which you do not know, or maybe it feels completely new, even though you thought you perfectly knew it for a very long time. Like a path, a good book needs to lead you to new perspectives, Pückler-Muskau in 1833 wrote: "Then what, in the end, is the value of a park which presents forever only the same picture from always the same points of view to me? What if there is no invisible hand leading me to the nicest points, showing to me the whole and make me understand it. That's the true purpose of a way. Ways are the dumb leaders of the stroller in the park, and they need to guide him without compulsion to every pleasure which an area can present."⁷

Why writing books about landscape architecture? Because in spite of cultural-pessimistic appraisals of some experts we have not come to the end of all garden art and landscape architecture at all, and we urgently need these "dumb leaders" who offer to us in a more and more complicated world at least a few landmarks which we need in search of new solutions in the landscape architecture. The first and most thrilling trip to a new, unknown destination always begins in our mind and then eventually becomes reality. Therefore, many new and maybe even revolutionary projects of landscape architecture will originate – just as in history – in one or the other really important book. But this will only happen if we do not allow drowning the culture of writing about landscape architecture in a flood of the popular images.

¹ Kienast, Dieter (1997): Kienast Gärten Gardens. Basel Berlin Boston.

² Amidon, Jane (2005): Moving Horizons. Die Landschaftsarchitektur von Kathryn Gustafson und Partner. Basel Berlin Boston

³ Petrow, Constanze A. (2005): Dialog mit der Öffentlichkeit. Kritik zeitgenössischer Landschaftsarchitektur in der Tagespresse. Dissertation. Hannover.

⁴ Gänshirt, Christian (2007): Werkzeuge für Ideen. Einführung ins architektonische Entwerfen. Basel Berlin Boston, p. 125 ff

⁵ see: Weilacher, Udo (2007): Syntax der Landschaft. Die Landschaftsarchitektur von Peter Latz und Partner. Basel Berlin Boston.

⁶ European Council of Landscape Architecture ECLAS (Hg): Important texts for landscape architecture from the last decade. in: JoLA. Journal of Landscape Architecture, Autumn 2008, p. 84 ff

⁷ Pückler-Muskau, Hermann Fürst von (1833, Reprint 1988): Andeutungen über Landschaftsgärtnerei. Frankfurt. p. 106