The Art of Survival: Recovering Landscape Architecture, Kongjian Yu and Mary Padua (Editor), Images, 2006

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Figure 01. There were, and still are, numerous rural Chinese villages that can be described today as Land of Peach Blossoms. They are the product of thousands of years of trial and error from our agricultural ancestors. They were described by westerners as poetic and picturesque, places where people and spirits are in harmony. (Photo, Yu, K.J.)
Abstract

In a new era of multiple unprecedented challenges imposed by the processes of industrialization and urbanization, landscape architecture is now on the verge of change in the world, and especially in China. It is time for this profession to take the great opportunity to position itself to play the key role in rebuilding a new Land of Peach Blossoms for a new society of urbanized, global, and interconnected people. In order to position itself for this sacred role, landscape architecture must define itself in terms of the art of survival, not just as a descendent of gardening. The profession must re-evaluate the vernacular of the land and the people, and lead the way in urban development by planning and designing an infrastructure of both landscape and ecology, through which landscape can be created and preserved as a medium, and as the connecting link between the land, the people, and the spirits.

Introduction

China is now at the stage of reshaping its rural and urban landscape. Urbanization, globalization, and the spread of materialism have provided an opportunity for landscape architecture as a profession to address the following three major challenges and opportunities in the coming decades. First, a solution must be found to address the energy and environmental crises. Second, cultural identity must be regained, and third, the sense of spiritual connection to the earth must be enhanced. The significance of landscape architecture as a profession in dealing with these worldwide challenges is comprehensive in its scope, examining the complexity of natural and biological processes, cultural and historical influences, and spiritual components.

IFLA president Martha Fajardo says that “Landscape architect is the profession of the future”. The future of the profession is positive and it is in a unique position to deal with the landscape as an agent for positive change. This future will only be ours if we are prepared.

To address this challenge, this paper will focus on several issues regarding the direction in which landscape architecture is headed. These questions include an analysis of the current era, the challenges and opportunities that landscape architecture currently face, a study of the mission of contemporary landscape architecture and its goal, and finally a look at how landscape architecture can take the lead role in addressing the major challenges of the time. It will also examine the strategies and adjustments landscape architecture should take to meet these challenges and compare the strategies that landscape architects can utilize to fulfill this mission.

1 The Land of Peach Blossoms and the Origin of Landscape Architecture as an Art of Survival

In an ancient Chinese story about a land of peach blossoms, told by poet Tao Yuanming (365-427AD). A fisherman traveling along a stream in a boat chances upon a place framed at both sides by blossoming peach trees. In the legend, the place, the source of the stream, was hidden behind a hill. The land had well-cultivated basins, paths, ditches, was surrounded by lush forest-covered hills, and was connected by a single narrow cave. In this isolated utopian landscape, a community lived happily as a family, where the elderly were healthy and the young were lively. The fisherman was welcomed into the peoples’ homes and treated with generous hospitality, and was entertained with wine and bountiful food. After the fisherman left the land of peach blossoms and returned to the city, he could never again find this land. This is, in essence, the original story of Shangri-La, a mystical, harmonious valley described in 1933 by British novelist James Hilton in Lost Horizon.

Since we have experienced such harmonious
landscapes, we believe that there were and still are numerous Chinese rural villages that can be described today as lands of peach blossoms. They are the product of thousands of years of the trials and errors of our agricultural ancestors. Natural disasters, including floods, droughts, earthquakes, landslides, soil erosion, as well as the experience of field making, irrigation, and food production, taught our ancestors to create and maintain such lands as the land of peach blossoms. It was the skill and art of survival that rendered our landscape productive, safe, beautiful, and meaningful (Figure 01).

For thousand years ago in China’s Yellow River Valley, during one of several thousand natural disasters, a village was completely buried by a flood and subsequent landslide, killing all of its inhabitants. When a mother was being buried in the mud, she protected her baby child, raised her head, stretched her arms, and called the gods for help (Figure 02). The responding god, Da Yu, was considered a deity who was able to make friends with the floods, and who began to use rules and measures, and made wise use of the land to select a safe place for the people to build a city. Da Yu was China’s first emperor (Figure 03).

Thus, landscape architecture had its origins in combination with the art of survival and the emperor’s leadership. It was this emperor’s art of survival and land stewardship, which evolved over thousands of years of trial and error, that helped the disasterstricken Chinese people select safe places for their settlements. They tilled fields yet kept the soil safe from erosion, diverted water for irrigation, and selected the right plants for food production (Figure 04).

Unfortunately, they did not appreciate the real traditional landscape of the Chinese vernacular of the land of peach blossoms, because they belonged to the lower culture that survived because of subsistence - a culture which was long associated with labouring and inferiority.

Instead, for 2000 years, the elite class of nobles and emperors recreated the land of peach blossoms...
soms for pleasure, using ornaments and false rockeries, which became celebrated as the high art of gardening.

Ironically, this art accelerated the decline of the feudalist Chinese empire. In this sense, the art of gardening had no more relevance than the art of foot binding, which was so much appreciated by the emperors and nobles (Figure 05a-07).

This decaying art of gardening was recognized as a glorious tradition of national identity, and remains highly regarded by current western

Figure 05a The "Land of Peach Blossoms" by an artist depicting the Grand View Garden built in the 1600s in China's last feudalist dynasty, the Qin. It was also known as "Garden of a Thousand Gardens". The basic model for each of the individual gardens was "Land of Peach Blossoms", which contained villas, pavilions, streams and bridges, exotic flowers, strangely formed rockery, and was surrounded by manmade hills. What was missing in this phony Land of Peach Blossoms was authentic productive fields and natural processes. (Courtesy Yuan Ming Yuan)

Figure 05b The Grand View Garden, The fake "Land of Peach Blossoms", was the first target burnt down by the invading western armies in 1860. It symbolizes the slow decay of feudalistic China, a period which ended in 1911 when the last emperor was forced to abdicate. (Photo, Yu, K.J.)

Figure 06 The art of foot binding was a celebrated practice to make women more desirable. The practice lasted more than one thousand years. It was said to be have been started by the last emperor of Nan Tang Dynasty (937-978 A.D), because his favored concubine had tiny feet. All other concubines and daughters of high ranking officials and nobles were encouraged to bind their feet as a kind of primitive cosmetic surgery. This art then flourished until the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. The art was seen as a twin of Chinese gardening and was equally enjoyed and celebrated among the intellectual classes. Natural "big feet" were considered inferior and marked a woman as belonging to the peasant class. (Source, Xin Hua)

Figure 07 The false rockery in Liu Yuan, a typical Chinese garden in Suzhou, listed as a world heritage site: a highly abstract and fake Land of Peach Blossoms in a "bottle gourd", enjoyed by Chinese intellectual nobles. (Photo, Yu, K.J.)
Chinese scholars alike (Figure 08a,b).

In contrast, when building the cities of tomorrow, created by taking mature trees from the villages, diverting streams from farms. It is the actual vernacular of the Land of Peach Blossoms that is being destroyed (Figure 09a-10b).

2 The Loss of Land of Peach Blossoms: Challenges and Opportunities for Landscape Architecture

The role of agriculture has declined in China’s urban-focused economy, along with the skills and the art of agricultural cultivation and stewardship. This process began with the gardens of classical scholar from thousands of years ago, and has now spread to civic art and landscape design. Landscape design, once the art of the emperors, has descended into the realm of the trivial. Thousands of landscape architects compete for a tiny piece of land in the city. Simultaneously, the major rivers run dry and polluted, the underground water table continues to drop, and in the north, sand storms are affecting the area’s arable land.

Each year, the processes of urbanization and materialization lure one percent (approximately 13 million people) of the Chinese population to abandon their Land of Peach Blossoms and rush into the city. This process has expanded urban boundaries and encroached on agricultural land (Figure 11a,b). The sacred feng shui forests have been cut and replaced with ornamental flowers. The graveyards of our ancestors have been leveled and their remains abandoned or removed to the planned cemetery. Ponds in front of the former villages have been filled, and whole villages have been wiped out and replaced with glorious, exotic, stylish walled communities. The meandering country roads are being replaced with six-lane motorways and a Baroque axis (Yu and Li, 2003, 2005).
In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Chinese began to work toward campaigns to beautify their cities, in line with the “new socialist countryside” campaign launched by the central Chinese government. This has placed Chinese landscape planning and design again at the forefront of an important precipice; there exists the danger of losing ecological integrity, cultural identity and historical heritage, while there also exists the great opportunity to create a new relationship between the land and the people in the current era.

Along with the processes of urbanization, the disappearance of the land of peach blossoms is obvious. The present era marks one of globalization and the spread of materialism. This has brought three major challenges and opportunities to landscape architecture in China:

2.1 The First Challenge: Can We Be Sustainable?

The first challenge is China’s deteriorating environment and ecology. At the heart of this matter is Chinese survival and sustainability (Figure 12a,b).

Sixty-five percent of China’s 1.3 billion people will, within 20 years, live in cities (the present rate is 40 percent). Two thirds of the 662 cities lack sufficient water and not a single river in the urban and suburban areas runs unpolluted. Thousands of dams crisscross nearly all rivers in China. More than ever, the general Chinese population is exposed to disastrous natural forces, as demonstrated by the numerous floods and droughts each year. The northern regions of China are in crisis because of desertification, where each year 3436 square kilometers of land become desert, a figure that is increasing each year. At present, the total area of desertification accounts for about 20 percent of the whole country, and each year about 5 billion tons of soil erodes into the ocean. (Jiang and Liu, 1994).
2004; Zhao, Huang, Yang and Guo, 2004). Statistics show that in the past 50 years, 50 percent of the China’s wetlands have disappeared, and 40 percent of the surviving wetlands have been polluted (Chen, Lu and Yong, 2004). The underground water level drops continuously. In Beijing for example, the underground water overuse is 110 percent, and each year the underground water level drops by one meter (Figure 12a-20b).

There are economic costs to this environmental destruction. While the GDP growth rate in the past 20 years is impressive in most Chinese cities, the annual loss caused by the environmental and ecological degradation is now between 7 and 20 percent of GDP. This is equal to, or even higher than the annual GDP growth (Guo 2004).

These are all by-products of China’s double-digit GDP growth rate and the nation’s speedy process of urbanization. One can only wonder if this is sustainable. Can China survive the rapid deterioration of the environment? What will this mean to the profession of landscape architecture, and how can landscape architecture position itself to play a role to meet such unprecedented challenges? This big picture leads us to argue that landscape architecture should be re-established as an art of survival, the emperor’s art of land design and stewardship.

2.2 Who Are We? The Challenge of Cultural Identity

China’s rapid and often chaotic socio-cultural transformation that started in the 1980s has led to a crisis in its national cultural identity. Traditionally, Chinese national identity was based on the feudalistic social and political order of the dynastic rulers. The architectural hallmarks of
China, even in 2006, the items listed as national and world heritage sites, are products of feudalism, the imperial era, and the official scholarly culture. While past achievements cannot be denied, it is necessary to ask whether this style represents national Chinese cultural identity in 2006 (Figure 21-25e).

This identity crisis is particularly obvious in the area of urban design. When a French designer places his own masterpiece (the National Grand Opera House) into the center of China’s capital to realize his own dream, or when the majestic but “dysfunctional” Central TV Tower is built only for the “power to bewitch” (Daniel Burnham), designers must question what is really being displayed to the rest of the world? Torn between its own imperial past and today’s Westernization, what is China’s identity? These are important, broader questions for China’s landscape architects to consider.

2.3 Why We Are Living: The Death of Gods

The third challenge is the loss of the spiritual homeland, where the soul rests and life is devoted to finding meaning.

My grandmother told me that when a tree grows old, it becomes a spirit, and that some spirits will inhabit the old trees. It has been said that the same is true of the fish, snakes, birds, and other animals. An old rock beside a village becomes a spirit as do streams, ponds, hills and the land itself. Our parents built temples in which to shelter and worship ancestors, the wise men of the past, and the religious spirits who safeguarded welfare. It was once believed that these spirits protected earthly life, and that the future would depend on their judgment. Such spirits gave meaning to life (Figure 26a,b).

The jobs of 40 million farmers have been lost in...
recent years, a figure that increases annually by two million. Where do the landless farmers belong and what is their spiritual homeland? The bankruptcy of the former state-owned factories has left more than 21 million workers jobless. How much will they suffer spiritually because they were conditioned to “regard the factory as their home”? (Figure 27a-28b)

The trend toward materialism has taken over China at a rapid rate, just as it has in other regions around the world. Every piece of land and all the elements in the landscape have been inhabited by various spirits where ancestors have been buried. These plains have been taken over by real estate development. The Dragon Hills, or the sacred hills, that secured numerous villages in rural China have been bulldozed. Meaningful and sacred streams and ponds that once shielded villages have been filled in or channeled in the name of flood control. Old camphor trees that house tree spirits have been pruned and sold to beautify city boulevards. Landscapes have become commercialized. Gradually, the spiritual connection to the land and to the world beyond this earthly one has been lost (Figure 29a-c).
It is certainly a nostalgic attitude to believe that the ideal agricultural landscape will be the model for everyday living, and it is native to believe that the land of peach blossoms can be regained and kept in the industrialized, motorized and globally connected society. A new type of land of peach blossoms must be explored and created, and it is to this mission that the profession of landscape architecture fits at the right time and at the right place. But how can this be achieved? How can landscape architecture assume the role to protect and rebuild such material and spiritual connections through the design of the physical environment? This is perhaps the most challenging question of all.

3 Recreating the Land of Peach Blossoms in a New Era: The Mission of Contemporary Landscape Architecture

3.1 What is the Mission?

In facing environmental and ecological degradation, a loss of cultural identity and the erosion of spiritual connection to the land, the mission of contemporary landscape architecture is to bring together again nature, people and the spirits, to create a new Land of Peach Blossoms in the urbanized, global, and industrialized era.

3.2 Why Landscape Architecture?

Landscape architecture can play a major role in the mission to rebuild the land of peach blossoms because it is a medium upon which various natural, cultural, and spiritual processes interact. This creates a workable link to gather and harmonize nature, people, and spiritual processes. Prominent naturalist and biologist Edward Wilson once commented that, “In the expanding...
enterprise, landscape design will play a decisive role. Where the environment has been mostly humanized, biological diversity can still be sustained at high levels by the ingenious placement of woodlots, hedgerows, watersheds, reservoirs, and artificial ponds and lakes. Master plans will meld not just economic efficiency and beauty, but also the preservation of the species and the race.” (Wilson 1992, Page317).

Landscape refers here not only to the issue of the environment and ecology but also to the mood of the entire nation, to its sense of identity, and its cultural bearings (Girot, 1999). Landscape provides a foundation for connection, for home, and for belonging (Corner, 1999). Landscape architecture is possibly the most legitimate profession among those dealing with the physical environment to work toward recovering cultural identity and rebuilding the spiritual connection between people and their land. The strength of landscape architecture lies in its intrinsic association with the natural systems and its roots in agricultural traditions, matching local practices and variegated across thousands of years of evolution.

It strengthens the motto that the best way to think globally is to act locally. Landscape architecture is the most workable scale for local action. Therefore, it is legitimate to argue that landscape architecture is a promising profession, and in China it is the right time to take on the mission of recreating the land of peach blossoms. Or to quote Patrick A Miller at the 2005 ASLA conference, “It is an opportune time to become a landscape architect”.

3.3 How and Where: Strategies and Approaches

How should landscape architecture as a profession respond to these challenges and what principles should landscape architecture adopt to prepare for a leading role to bring together the land, people and spirits?

Firstly, landscape design should harmonize with nature, its processes, patterns and the sustainable welfare of humanity. Landscape design should be practiced with people in mind, while at the same time considering human culture and identity. Landscape architecture should also be designed with spirits in mind, connecting the land and the people as individuals, as well as in terms of family and social groups. These three principles of land, people and spirits require landscape architecture to adjust its own position and value.

Secondly, it is also about who we are and where we come from. In turn, this determines what we
will become in the future, what we should value, that which determines where and what kind of landscape is being preserved and created. As such, it is necessary to address the three following points.

3.3.1. Recover Landscape Architecture as the Art of Survival

First and foremost, if landscape architecture is to establish itself as a profession that safeguards humanity and brings together the land, the people, and the spirit, its origins must be reconsidered. Its roots must be recovered as the regal lord’s art of survival, land design, and land stewardship, and not as an art of entertaining and gardening. McHarg has expressed the role of the architect as a means of survival thus: “We told you so; you’ve got to listen to us because we’re landscape architects. We’re going to tell you thereafter where to live and how to live there. Where to live and where not to live. That’s what Landscape Architecture and regional planning is all about. Don’t ask us about your garden. Don’t ask us about your bloody flowers. Don’t ask us about your dying trees. You can do something quite vulgar with all of them. We are going to talk to you about survival.” (Miller and Pardal, 1992)

More than half a century ago, educator and landscape architect, Hideo Sasaki commented that, “The profession of landscape architecture stands at a critical fork in the road. One fork leads to a significant field of endeavor contributing to the betterment of the human environment, while the other points to a subordinate field of superficial embellishment.” Unfortunately, except for some rare cases, landscape architecture in the past decade has been biased toward “a subordinate field of superficial embellishment”. We could have taken one more important role in some of the most pressing environmental issues including flood control and water management, the protection of biodiversity and cultural heritage, urbanization and land resources management (Figure 30a-34b).

One of the most important reasons for landscape architecture’s weakness in addressing major environmental issues is that landscape architecture, as a profession, is still associated with the ancient tradition of gardening. The rich heritage and overwhelming literatures about gardening and garden art did not help landscape architecture emerge as a modern discipline. It is time to declare that landscape architecture is not a di-
rect descendent of garden art, but a descendent of the survival skills of our ancestors who had to endure a changeable environment, ensuring a safe place away from floods and enemies, while surviving by leveling the land, planting and irrigating crops, and saving water and other resources for sustaining the family and the people. Landscape architecture works on a larger and more significant scale than the field of garden arts.

The Landscape needs to be recovered (Corner, 1999) and the profession of landscape architecture needs to be recovered. This suggests that more international efforts are required to give landscape architecture more publicity through illustrative cases and to demonstrate how landscape architecture plays the leading role in dealing with the big environmental and survival issues.

3.3.2 Value the Vernacular: Back to the Authentic Relationship of Land and People

By vernacular, I mean the common and everyday, as opposed to the grand and exotic. Cultural identity and spiritual connection can be regained only if we value the culture of the common people, their life and their daily needs, as well as value the common things that are authentic to the land under foot.

Since the appearance of the first imperial and intellectual gardens in China, as well as in other countries, landscaping and gardening had become indulgent in creating the exotic and the grand, and being different from the common landscape and living environment. This can be well illustrated by the Chinese Imperial Garden of Shanglin Yuan of more than 2000 years ago, which features exotic plants and animal species. Another example is the intellectual gardens of South China’s Souzhou, which represented spectacular and exotic scenic spots using rocks and water, and the imperial Grand View Gardens of the 17th century, which was a collection of gardens from South China. In this sense, there is virtually no difference to western Culture, as reflected in the English gardens that
 included exotic ornamental species from China, and Versailles, that were created as a paradise in a sea of “chaotic vernacular landscape”.

The overwhelming Beautiful Cities movement in China, as inherited from that of the United States, also has its own “city gardens” origin, but is an extension of this decorative cosmetic and exotic search. For a long time, indeed more than 2000 years, the art of landscaping has lost its way in searching for senseless style, meaningless form and exotic grandeur. Landscape gardening has for a long time been limited to the elite class, including the city dwellers, who have not cared about the survival of the common people in the continuous struggle with flood and draught.

In China, only recently has it been found that it is the elite class themselves who are now suffering, perhaps no less than the farmers, from the nation’s deteriorating environment. The skills of survival reflect the authentic relationship between the land and people, and it is this authentic relationship that gives the culture and the people its identity. It is therefore critical for landscape architecture to go back to the land, go back to the vernacular relationship, to recover survival skills in dealing with flood, drought, soil erosion, making fields, and food production, and more broadly to regain its cultural identity.

3.3.3 Landscape Architecture Leading the Way: The Negative Approach — Landscape as Infrastructure for Urban Development

How landscape changes is related to the issue of time. The processes of urbanization and globalization occur rapidly and overwhelming, and a “negative” approach should be taken against the conventional development planning approach. By negative, it is meant that landscape architects and planners should lead the way in urban development by identifying and designing a landscape infrastructure that is critical in safeguarding the ecological processes, and the cultural heritages that give us our cultural identity and feed the spiritual needs, before the development plan evolves.

Time in the conventional model of urbanization is visualized in the concentric annual sprawl. For a long time, greenbelts and green wedges were seen as landscape structures to stop and prevent such sprawl, and they were pre-designed in the comprehensive master plan. Current evidence based on the United States (for example, the Washington DC region), as well as Chinese examples, show that these greenbelt and wedge dreams have failed. Some of the major reasons that the greenbelt and green wedge have failed to prevent urban sprawl include:

1. The artificial planning and the lack of an intrinsic relationship between the green elements and the living earth system;

2. A lack of usage by the residents, due to their inaccessibility and lack of connectivity between green space and housing projects;

3. Green wedges usually function only as barriers to stop urban sprawl processes, and offer a
lack of integration of various functions, such as flood control, recreational use, heritage protection, and habitat protections;

4 They quickly become development opportunities when peripheral pressures increase;

5 They are impossible to administer and safeguard in a metropolitan region that is fragmented into many local governments, cutting across greenbelt and wedge jurisdictions.

The search continues for a more differentiated, fine-grained ecological integration model that can be envisioned, implemented and managed at all scales. As a consequence, the ecological planning approach has risen to prominence again, typically under the flag of the McHarg Layer model, which attempts to provide land use planning on a sound ecological basis.

Under this framework, time is visualized as a line that links, and as a tool that enables understanding, and integrates vertically different layers of physical, natural, and cultural processes. These include the earliest geological processes, soil processes, vegetation processes, and finally leaves on top the most recent layer of cultural processes. It is a vision of progress of natural evolution based on the intrinsic values of a specific site on the earth. The core for this model of ecological planning is that what fits best can plan urban development. With the maximum fitting of the land use pattern to the intrinsic values on the earth, the best development pattern can be achieved.

These two models, namely the conventional urban growth model and the ecological planning model, are incompatible. One of the obvious reasons for this incompatibility is that the conventional urban growth is often a horizontal process, while the ecological suitability analysis is essentially a vertical process. The green space based on the layering model not only protects the horizontal ecological processes, such as species movement in the system, it may actually become attractive for intensive urban development due to the higher economic value surrounding this greenbelt, which may eventually be encroached upon by development.

The development of landscape ecology, which focuses on landscape patterns, horizontal processes and change, provides us with the fundamentals to develop green infrastructure that can be used to integrate the horizontal processes of urban development with ecological protection. This is a new ecological planning model in which time can be visualized as a multi-scaled ecological infrastructure, or landscape security pattern (Yu, 1996), that safeguards the various ecological, cultural and spiritual processes across the landscape, and provides ecosystems services for the sustainability of a region and a city such as water and flood processes, biodiversity protection and species flow, and recreation.

At a large scale, the ecological infrastructure is represented as permanent regional landscape of flood prevention, ecological networks, heritage corridors and recreational corridors, which are to be planned for protection and used to define the urban growth pattern and city form.
that reflected the balanced relationship between man and nature, and that recorded people’s hardship and happiness. The knowledge and skills associated with this authentic relationship sustain people for generation after generation, give people their identity, and provide their lives with meaning. Their knowledge and skills make up the essence of the profession called landscape architecture. This art of survival, however, has been buried and submerged in the high art of gardening, which only reflects a false relationship between the land and people.

At the new era, the balance between man and nature has again become critical so that a new, harmonious relationship must be built. This is the opportunity for landscape architecture to recover its role as an art of survival, and to take the position to recreate a new type of land of peach blossoms, that sustains humanity, gives people their identity, and makes their life meaningful. In order to do that, landscape architecture must break with the art of gardening, and return to the vernacular landscape and people, and must lead the process of urban development by preserving and integrating cultural and ecological landscapes into the infrastructure.

References


