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The Lay of the Land

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Now that we are well over a decade into Post-Modern architecture, it is easy to see what a disappointment much of it has turned out to be. What was promised to be brave and new has often, in built fact, turned out thin, repetitious, and silly. For this reason, a strongly negative public reaction must soon follow, and indeed it has already begun.

But all is not lost. The adventures of the last decade have at least shown us—or, more accurately, they have at least discretely hinted at—three useful lessons:

First, we have begun to learn to look backwards, over our shoulders as it were, to our architectural past. At best, we have learned to do this not as plunderers, nor as zealots of some particular style, but as stewards of the past's riches, available once more for use in our own time.

Second, we have begun to look sideways—that is, to our colleagues, the decorative artists and ornamentalists whom we (and also our designs) had previously been used to holding at arm's length.

Last, we have begun to look outwards to the whole environment in a different way than before. We have, that is, started to learn from landscape.

The subject of landscape has thus become the rage in almost every architectural quarter, having the kind of status in the mid-1980s that historicism, structural expressionism, or vernacularism possessed in earlier epochs in the evolution of design trends.

What is landscape? Our modern word "landscape" comes from the late Middle English words *land*, which means "land," and *skip*, which I believe in this context means "shape." So landscape can mean "land-shape," or "the shape of the land." I actually slightly prefer "the *lay* of the land," which has the ability to imply—appropriately, I think—a human situation as well as a topographic configuration.

Landscape, as it is currently discussed in architectural circles, seems actually to be two basically different things. The first is, of course, the more traditional design discipline as practiced by architects and landscape architects. The second is a mainly descriptive and analytical discipline.

This latter discipline is sometimes called "cultural landscape" or "human geography," the study of the earth as modified by people. Human geography is thus a very inclusive subject, which, of course, accounts for a large part of its appeal. It is the study of people through the study of the shapes they have made across the face of the world, and thus it potentially coalesces with human history itself, since it is hard to think of many significant human acts that, sooner or later, did not result in some physical modification to the earth. In practice, of course, human geographers focus primarily on the more obvious modifications like fields, roads, dams, bridges, towns and, of course, buildings.

However involved studies of human geography may become, they are in

fact based on a single, quite simple axiom: The physical configuration of the man-made world—any part of it, not just high-style architecture or consciously designed gardens—can be observed in the same way that a chronicle of political or social events can be read, and the result will be found to have human meaning.

The first kind of landscape that I mentioned—landscape design—is of intense interest to many architects today. They feel it is a subject of vital importance, avidly study its history and assert somewhat tactlessly that its essence is something with which the actual profession of landscape architecture has somehow lost touch.

Architects, like everyone else, need every so often to feel that they have discovered something new. The recent discovery of landscape design is in many ways not so much a discovery as it is a somewhat new way of reformulating an old and enduring concern.

This concern, quite simply, is for a way of understanding and then making the connection between individual buildings and the rest of the world. The geographer Peirce (sic) Lewis has suggested that architects could better improve the world by paying closer attention to two things: centers and edges. When he says this, he seems to be implying that architects have on the whole done somewhat better at the former than at the latter, and I suspect few would disagree. Learning from landscape design is meant to be a way of redressing this imbalance.