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## **Landscape, History, and Forgetting**

**A response to D. Fairchild Ruggles, 2009, "A Critical View of Landscape Preservation and the Role of Landscape Architects," *PER* 2: 65-72**

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In her 2009 article on the need to expand the role of landscape architects in the field of preservation, D. Fairchild Ruggles explains why it is that landscapes have been marginalized within the field of preservation and why landscape is an inherently problematic subject within traditional preservation practice. Too often, historic landscapes are treated as "disposable frame[s] for architecture" rather than historical artifacts in their own right (Ruggles 2009, 71). Ruggles calls on educators to strengthen the field of landscape preservation within the context of professional landscape architecture degree programs. She makes the important point that landscape preservation should not be taught only in specialized programs but should be integrated within the general professional curriculum, so that basic preservation skills become part of the repertoire of every practicing professional. This pedagogic change, she claims, would shore up the ethos of stewardship within the profession of landscape architecture as a whole and prepare landscape architects to take on these issues in practice.

Ruggles's article provokes many questions regarding the challenges of landscape preservation. Why is landscape so slippery a concept? Why is it "disposable"—and sometimes even invisible? What accounts for the difficult relationship between landscape and history?

Ruggles partially attributes the marginalization of landscape within the field of historic preservation to the ways that "heritage" was narrowly defined early on by such organizations as UNESCO and ICOMOS, with an emphasis on material objects, buildings, and monuments. However, while these conventions served to codify certain biases, they reflect deeper historical

rifts between the design disciplines. Landscape architecture was established as a profession in the late nineteenth century, but its influence declined with the rise of modernism in the early to mid-twentieth century, just at the time when preservation was taking root. Many historians have shown how the mainstream ideology of modern architecture overlooked landscape or rendered it invisible. The site was conceived as a *tabula rasa*, emptied of history and cultural meaning.<sup>1</sup> It was treated as a neutral platform for an architecture that appeared to exist outside of time.

Modernism has tended to suppress the reading of sites and landscapes, but the conception of site as *tabula rasa* does not characterize only modern architecture. In his article "The American Ideology of Space," Leo Marx described the European settlers' peculiarly ahistorical perception of the New World landscape as fundamentally empty — a "raw nature, a cultural vacancy untouched by history waiting to be filled by migrating Europeans" (Marx 1991, 63). The "myth of emptiness" is a common feature of colonial landscapes and has served to define the West and distinguish it from the non-Western world.<sup>2</sup> Landscape is read as a passive background or setting on which to enact a mythic narrative of nation-building.

This "disappearing act" of the landscape is complicated by the ways in which landscape is such an effective medium for masking social and political interests by naturalizing these relationships; that is, landscape makes what is "patently cultural appear as if it were natural."<sup>3</sup> The landscape appears to have always been there, thereby concealing its construction and the social relations that have shaped it. As landscape naturalizes power relations, it loses its legibility and effectively erases history.

Postmodern approaches to landscape have reconceptualized the site as full, rather than empty, and the *tabula rasa* metaphor has been replaced by the image of the palimpsest, where the land is likened to a text, or a surface that is inscribed, scraped clean, and reinscribed — “something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form.”<sup>4</sup> The image of the landscape as a built-up surface of accreted layers joins a physical description of land with a historical idea of time. The palimpsest metaphor describes landscape by means of a dynamic process — of writing, erasing, and rewriting. Time is inscribed in the landscape not as a single unfolding narrative but as a juxtaposition of multiple historical traces. The present is engaged with the past.

Understanding landscapes in this way underscores the importance of history. The palimpsest metaphor suggests an idea of history that is multivalent, fragmentary, and sometimes contradictory. Landscapes are both material and conceptual, or symbolic; landscape must be read as a physical place, as well as a cultural practice — as W.J.T. Mitchell has written, “not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed” (Mitchell 1994, 1).

Ruggles’s proposal to integrate landscape preservation within the professional design curriculum not only serves to bring it into mainstream practice; inevitably, it demands that we rethink the relationship of design and history. Design invention and preservation are not mutually exclusive strategies; they exist on a continuum. Designers, too, must critically engage the site’s natural and cultural history—not as a stylistic or formal reference but as a source of meaning and identity, with all of its conflicting narratives and erasures. History must be read in all of its complexity — otherwise preservation risks becoming another means of forgetting.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. See Carol Burns’s 1991 discussion of the “cleared site” vs. the “constructed site.” For a discussion of the decline of landscape architecture as a fine art with the advent of modernism, see Elizabeth Meyer 2005.
2. See Andrew Sluyter 2002 for a discussion of this concept. For a discussion of the idea of emptiness in the making of the white South African landscape, see Jeremy Foster 2008; on the Israeli landscape, see Meron Benvenisti 2000 and W.J.T. Mitchell 2000.
3. James Duncan, quoted in Sluyter 2002, p. 9.
4. Oxford Dictionaries Online, s.v. “Palimpsest.” Retrieved October 16, 2011, from <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/palimpsest>.

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