



SUMMARY OF ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION AND FUTURE CONCERNS

James L. Wescoat, Jr.

The Dumbarton Oaks roundtable series seeks to facilitate searching discussions of topics of contemporary intellectual and practical concern. Discussion of the arid landscape design case studies was wide-ranging and lively. This chapter briefly summarises the main themes under four broad headings:

1. Landscape technologies and knowledge
2. Community, privacy, and political institutions
3. Cultural dimensions of sustainable landscape design
4. Varieties of “naturalism” in arid regions

At the end of the programme, participants were asked to identify a key theme or concern that they would choose to focus upon in future discussions. Those future concerns are also summarised below.

COMMON DISCUSSION THEMES

Landscape Technologies and Knowledge

Technological aspects of sustainable landscape design figured prominently throughout the discussion. Participants shared ideas about pond systems for wastewater treatment, constructed wetlands, water conservation, plant propagation, and planting technologies. Provocative proposals for artificial turf and plastic trees from 20 years ago were briefly revisited. Some lines of environmental research (e.g., on sand dune stabilisation) were deemed overly technical and insufficiently concerned with social and cultural aspects of design. Some discussants advanced ideas about the roles of modern and high-tech building

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technologies, which led to questions about the continuing influence of modernism and internationalism in environmental design. Others raised questions about the roles of traditional and local knowledge in landscape design, which led to broader questions about the relations between technologies and different systems of knowledge.

Concern about the types of knowledge needed for sustainable landscape design dovetailed closely with discussions of the role of education in sustainable landscape design - both in academic settings like the Center for Regenerative Studies and in public settings. Some lamented the lack of public education about design while others stressed the need for greater education of designers by public groups (e.g., children and communities).

Perhaps the most common view of the group envisioned multiple combinations of landscape technologies and types of knowledge, depending upon the problems and situations involved.

Community, Privacy, and Political Institutions

The debate about public education was paralleled by discussions of community, privacy, and political institutions. The case studies in Iran raised questions about the nature of “community”, “the public”, and “private” life. Although most agreed that different patterns of community sustained different types of landscape design, the nature of those patterns and sustaining relations was not resolved. The children’s park project in Cairo offered a dynamic approach to community involvement and influence in design, and it also raised questions about the role of ritual in community building activities.

Discussion of sand stabilisation projects in Sudan, by contrast, stressed the importance of individual as well as collective responsibility and of individual land tenure security - themes that seem to have increasing salience in international development planning and policy. A re-



lated chord was struck in comments made about the importance of committed clients, patrons, and donors in Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Institutions were regarded more as constraints on design, whether in California or Iran, than as part of the creative domain of design. Examples were given of bureaucratic behaviour and regulations that retarded shifts toward more sustainable landscape practices. The two case studies in Iran prompted comments about the impact of radical changes in political institutions on landscape design - the park in Tehran is noteworthy in that it thrived both before and after the revolution, which led to discussions of the cultural bases of arid zone landscape design.

Cultural Dimensions of Landscape Sustainability

The two major cultural themes concerned “difference” and “universals”, again both in the context of Iran. Some argued that the sustainable use of “public”, “community”, and “private” spaces (which proved to be unsatisfactory terms) were fundamentally different in Iran than in the West, while others raised questions and qualifications. The suc-

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cess of the Tehran park project before and after the revolution, however, led to a proposition by Dr. Mina Marefat that it may have achieved something of universal significance by speaking to basic human yearnings.

The idea of a common humanity recalled one of Ismail Serageldin’s principal themes, and it was repeated in the Saudi Arabian case study where a “human love of desert and trees” was said to account for the success of the Diplomatic Quarter landscape design outside Riyadh. When the discussion turned to Riyadh itself, however, participants questioned its coherence and sustainability.

Varieties of “Naturalism” in Arid Landscape Design

At the very start of the roundtable, a question was raised about the meaning of “nature” in arid environments. Although not taken up systematically, this question reappeared under each of the broad headings discussed above. Some participants stressed the role of natural technologies (i.e., those which employ or emulate natural materials and processes) while others were satisfied with a naturalistic appearance or allusions to nature in modern design and construction technologies. None of the participants in the group argued for strictly “native” plantings.

Indeed, it seems significant that the most common views of nature for this group were explicitly linked with ideas about society and culture. The basic human yearnings in Tehran noted above are viewed as natural desires; the principles of regenerative design and desert landscape forms are jointly social and natural; sand dune stabilisation in the Sudan integrates ecological and social adjustments of and to the environment; and the Diplomatic Quarter in Saudi Arabia brings together a love of deserts and oases.

Future Concerns

These four broad themes were barely defined before the roundtable concluded. They suggest many different directions for discussion, research, and design practice. To discern some of these future concerns, participants were asked to identify a major topic or question they would like to pursue further. Some of the common concerns are listed below:

1. The agricultural basis of landscape design.
2. The role of water in sustainable landscape design.
3. Comparison of landscape design in different climates.
4. Measurement of “sustainability”.
5. Comparison of Muslim new towns and Israeli kibbutzi.
6. Diffusion of sustainable design innovations.
7. Extension of local lessons to the regional scale.
8. Examination of the flows of arid zone experience between East and West.
9. Public education and sustainable landscape design.
10. Sustainable landscape design and curriculum development.
11. Longer term studies of the roots and sources of sustainable landscape design in theory and practice.
12. Attention to the role of humans in heavily modified landscapes.
13. Emphasis on the “range of choice” available to arid zone occupants.
14. Comparisons of sustaining and non-sustaining human behaviours (as in the Iranian case studies).
15. Adaptation and transformation of colonial patterns in post-colonial environments of the arid realm.
16. Consideration of economic class in sustainable arid zone landscape design.
17. Greater attention to theories of culture and order.

It is perhaps a reflection of these case studies, drawn from widely different cultural geographic contexts, and of the challenging issues they raised, that most of the roundtable participants would choose to pursue the fundamentally human dimensions of sustainable landscape design in arid environments.

Coda

The well known preface to the *Gulistan* (Rose Garden) of Sadi states:

“You are not ignorant that the flower of the garden soon fadeth, and that the enjoyment of the rose bush is of but a short continuance; and the sages have declared that the heart ought not to be set upon anything that is transitory...

I am able to form a book of roses which will delight the beholders, and gratify those who are present; whose leaves the tyrannical arm of the autumnal blasts can never affect, nor injure the blossoms of the spring.”¹

In the *Gulistan*, the listener throws away the flowers he has collected to listen to poems, “that will flourish forever”. In this roundtable discussion and related efforts, however, we return to the vulnerability, transitoriness, and beauty of the actual “rose gardens” that grace this world (*dunya*) and for which we bear a responsibility.

NOTES

1. Sadi, M.S. 1980 reprint. *Gulistan*. Trans. Francis Gladwin. Islamabad: LokVirsa Publishing House, xv-xvi