

WHOSE POLITICS DO YOU STYLE?

If all designers serve some political will, whose will do you serve? **By Randolph Hester, FASLA**

DO YOU EVER CONSIDER what your political stance is as a landscape architect? That is, beyond saying, "I'm a Republican" or "I didn't vote for Bush" or "Politics are so dirty, I try to keep out of them." I'm asking about the political agendas we actively promote in the day-to-day professional work we do. You might respond that design is not political and certainly not activist. That is ab-

surd: No landscape architectural design is ever implemented without political activity, and building anything requires considerable force. There is no passive design—even passive solar design is assertive. Open space preservation requires political mobilization, and certainly landscape architecture that serves status quo powers is seldom submissive and often brutal.

Every act of city making, landscape ar-

chitecture, and environmental planning is a direct act to achieve some political end, the very definition of activism. Every landscape architect is a political activist, but for whom?

For some designers, this activism expands the boundaries of self-expression. For other designers, it pushes or constricts the boundaries of society. In all cases, design creates an order, however temporary or deconstructed, that elevates some political will. Every design action is a political act that supports power and authority.

Form makers follow political function, whether the designer leads social transformations by designing parks that welcome the homeless or celebrates corporate or military authority by designing fortress-like public spaces. But the form may be deceiving. Avant-garde form most often advances the agenda of the elite within the dominant society seeking to conserve its power. Conservative form frequently serves socially transformative purposes, particularly for the oppressed, the poor, the colonized, and the war torn. But beyond aesthetics, is there a substantive difference in the various political approaches designers employ? Yes, it is a question of design activism for whom.

Political Styles

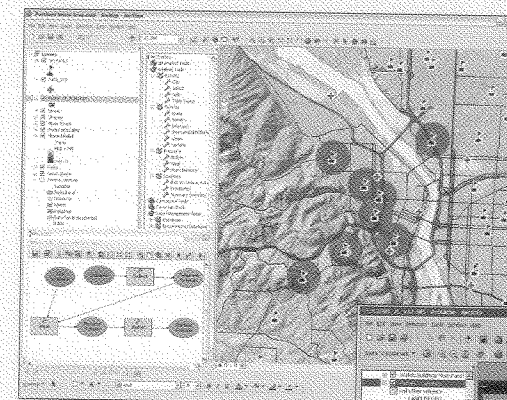
As with most matters of landscape architecture, typologies explicate. The following five types of designer postures illustrate political stances:

1. The Blissfully Naïve
2. The Savvy Naïve
3. Servants
4. Contextualists
5. Catalysts

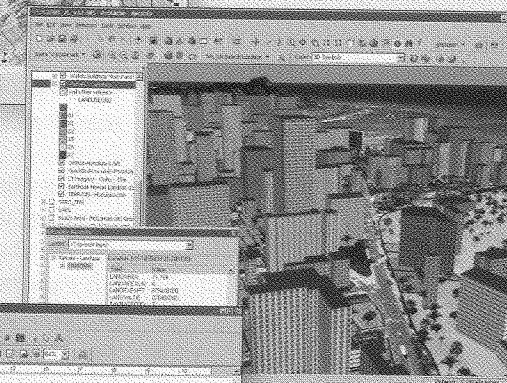
The Blissfully Naïve are typically spatially talented and contextually ignorant. They simply do not see the connectedness of systems beyond their landscape architecture. Their naïveté allows them to design waterhogging resorts in American deserts that require river diversions, segregated corporate campuses that necessitate two-hour commutes, low-density suburbs around Atlanta that contribute to asthma in the city center, an airport in a Taiwan lagoon that causes the extinction of an endangered bird and the loss of 24,000 fishing jobs, and Orange County-like subdivisions in China

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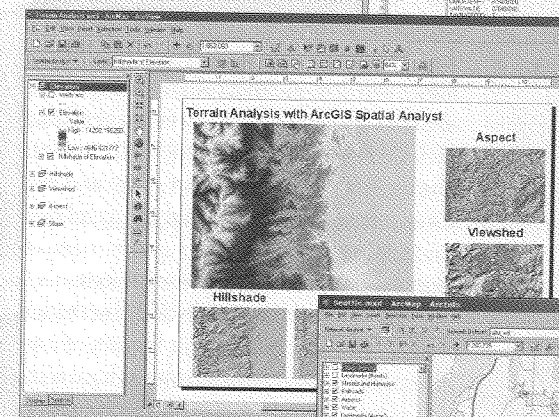
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that undermine local culture with unattainable objects of status.

Can the design of the landscape really be separated from the decision about its location? For the Blissfully Naïve it can. They are so focused on the form making of objects that they are blind to the impacts of their actions. They have unusual tunnel (and no peripheral) vision. Because they can draw and create space, they have been rewarded in school, where design is frequently separated from its political consequences to focus on the development of form-making skills. Later, sheltered in the best corporate firms, they work without having to confront the political or environmental consequences of their actions. I believe the Blissfully Naïve truly don't know whose values they support or whose politics they advance. They say with sincerity that there is no relationship between landscape architecture and politics.

Second are the Savvy Naïve, who are usually less talented spatially and more aware of connectedness. They feign naïveté to cover political shrewdness. They know power when they see it and cast their lot with the powerful to get commissions. They are so pleased to design something big or temporarily beautiful that they pretend not to know better. They understand the political implications of their design work but claim ignorance. The Savvy Naïve can develop, as the architect Thomas Leitersdorf did, the Israeli strategy to control the Palestinians by capturing the most ground with the fewest settlements possible. His is a terrible but brilliant landscape-architecture-inspired military action to take over hilltops and dominate the entire West Bank while occupying only two percent of the land. This same architect, apparently with a straight face, claims to be "weak on politics" and says that "architecture doesn't influence politics." The Savvy Naïve are well aware of the politics they advance and are active accomplices to political power, but they say they are "just designers."

The third type is the Servant, a category that includes most designers. Seldom feigning naïveté, Servants describe their

role as serving clients. When questioned, they too say that they are only giving form to their clients' needs. However, unlike the Blissfully Naïve, they are well aware that their actions may have unfortunate secondary impacts. Indeed, an individual design act, a single building or park, may seem inconsequential in the broader political context, but this is only an excuse. Where-

What Kind of Designer Are You?

BLISSFULLY NAÏVE

You sincerely believe there is no relationship between landscape architecture and politics.

SAVVY NAÏVE

You feign naïveté about politics to cover political shrewdness.

SERVANT (MOST DESIGNERS)

You understand that your designs have political consequences but insist that you must "serve the client."

CONTEXTUALIST

You play Servant roles but try to address broader social issues within the bounds of polite politics.

CATALYST

You are an agent of change who sees designs as stimuli to bring about political transformations.

as the Blissfully Naïve don't comprehend the connection between design and politics, Servants understand and often support the normative political agendas of their clients. Although the Servant role might be viewed as demeaning, these designers argue that it is fundamental to a service profession such as landscape architecture, and they don't acknowledge their complicit role in giving artistic expression to powerful interests—private, corporate, or state. In fact, the power of these clients is attractive because it enables the designer's art, most of which is rather mundane. It is this subservient political role and the

artistic license it allows that Phillip Johnson referenced when he said that all architects are "whores" to those with power. With Servants, we often see the avant-garde form serving regressive social and aggressive military ends. The Servant role can be particularly profitable for the business-oriented landscape architect.

The fourth type is the Contextualist, who takes into account history, culture, and environment, especially at the site scale. Contextualists may play at being Servants but, in most cases, will try to address broader social issues within the bounds of polite politics. This frequently pays off with an unusual, almost accidental, *coup de main* for a cause like environmental justice or sustainability. Contextualists support more radical activists although they may not be radical themselves.

Agents for Change

Catalysts, the fifth type, are landscape architectural agents of change, the group usually considered activist designers. Other designers call this group "radical designers," largely to marginalize them and stigmatize their design. Admittedly, some aren't skilled or savvy form makers. Others, like architect Sam Mockbee and landscape architect Walter Hood, FASLA, were and are. Catalysts see design not only as symbolic and utilitarian ends but also stimuli to bring about political transformations.

The focus of the intended outcomes varies. Consider briefly four focuses of catalyst designers: environmental justice, deep democracy, cultural and biological diversity, and radical sustainability.

Environmental Justice. Issues of justice have long been a central focus of a few landscape architects. Unequal distribution of basic resources like housing and open space, inaccessibility, and exclusion motivates a few designers who work as advocates for the poor and dispossessed. Long before Paul Davidoff, who invented advocacy planning to serve disenfranchised people, gave such efforts a name, some landscape architects created a form of practice to address inequities in poor communities. Led by the late landscape architect Karl Linn, a whole generation worked in civil rights advocacy. Today some designers are aggressive advocates for place-appropriate economic development and

equal access to nature. In almost every city, open space is disproportionately available to wealthier neighborhoods. The recent project for Union Point Park, by Mario Schjetnan, FASLA, in Fruitvale, California, and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Nature Park in South Central Los Angeles only came to fruition after authorities were embarrassed with maps clearly showing a pattern of discrimination against the poor in providing parkland in Oakland and Los Angeles. Such maps of environmental injustices are powerful tools for some designers.

Participation, Empowerment, and Deep Democracy. Other Catalysts focus on participation in the design process to empower the less powerful and nurture deep democracy. Daniel Iacofano, ASLA, and Susan Goltsman, FASLA, attend directly to the involvement of diverse groups often excluded from democratic decision making. They have created new participatory methods that allow disenfranchised people their own voices. Their inventions include phenomenological techniques like scored walking tours, city views, and stewardship workdays. They demonstrate that good cities today depend on an empowered, well-educated, and responsible citizenry willing to practice direct democracy and complex stewardship. These traits are especially critical for healthy landscapes. Direct and active involvement in grassroots design and civic affairs is one cornerstone of deep democracy, whereby people do much more than just vote. Rather, they shape their communities with vision and forethought, volunteer, and steward the land and other community members.

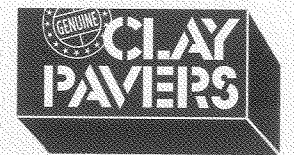
Cultural and Biological Diversity. Many Catalysts design primarily to maintain diversity in the face of global homogenization. Through what is called "postmodern resistance," these designers actively resist global forces of sameness. They are regionalists. They use local materials and traditional ways of building. These designers create alternative economies and habitation that enhance cultural and biological diversity.

Hood's design for Lafayette Square Park aggressively included the marginal users most city authorities hoped he would force out. His design maintains subcultural diversity from the playground for the affluent to the informal economy of barbershops set

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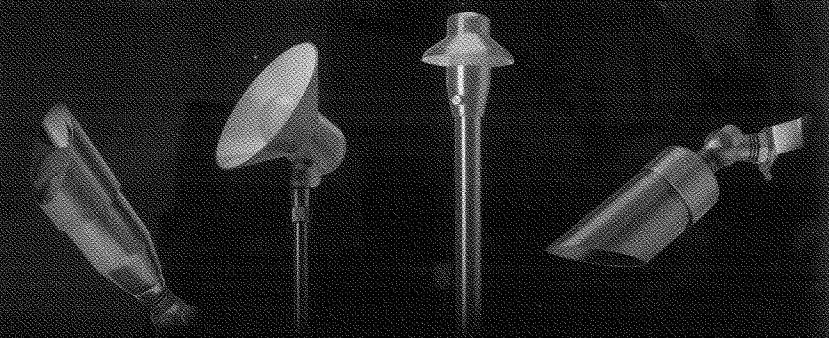
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OPINIONS

up in the bathroom and the places for old men to hang out under the trees.

Catalyst landscape architects depend on power maps to reveal points where they should concentrate efforts. Power maps describe the people with formal and informal authority, their vested interests, their alliances, and their interactions with opposing interests. They are essential fare for change agents. Equally important in making plans that challenge dominant powers are the geometries of local people's daily patterns and projected patterns of new economies. By mapping the activities unique to a culture or a city and describing them in spatial terms, designers draw inspiration from the distinctiveness of a people and place. Such patterns of everyday urbanism have created extraordinary landscapes, like the floating gardens around Lalu Island in Sun Moon Lake in the Republic of China and Matsu City Square off the coast of mainland China. Lalu is a sacred site to indigenous people. Their culture is embedded in the floating gardens that provide them with vegetables and in the lakes that supply them with fish. And Matsu City Square has hundreds of vegetable garden plots and looks very different from our passive greens. Catalyst designers highlight cultural differences in the landscape, while other landscape architects homogenize the world.

These grassroots plans are at odds with standard global solutions to destroy cultures and wildlands for large-scale industrial complexes and global corporate sameness. These designs are modest interventions, controlled by local people and reflecting local particularities. Although each project is small, it is conceived within a big vision that resists the authority that would eliminate biological and cultural diversity. These plans represent a vastly different view of the future than those pushed by the global corporate states.

Radical Sustainability. Other agents of change advocate more radical development strategies for sustainability. These visionary futures require significant alterations in lifestyle. Environmental activist Richard Register's plan for Berkeley, California, calls for consolidating land uses and

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converting the city into self-sustaining neighborhoods within a century, eliminating dependence on the car. In her work restoring California streams and rivers, landscape architect Ann Riley creates a natural framework that manages storm-water ecologically and provides new habitat and recreation space (see "Ripple Effect," *Landscape Architecture*, August 2002). These strategies entice people to live more sustainably by providing a whole package of benefits through substitutions, offering access to transit, more community facilities, more mixed-use walkable neighborhoods, and more access to nature and traditional house types. In exchange, the strategies require modestly higher densities. While characterized as a form of romantic resistance, these are highly sophisticated design alternatives to unsustainable suburban sprawl.

Radical sustainability's success relies on confronting entrenched development patterns and centers of vast power directly. But the power of political and economic interests should not be underestimated. When landscape architects Gary Mason and Doug Wolfe first proposed unearthing Strawberry Creek in Berkeley, they were opposed by almost every authority in the region. Courage, perseverance, and keen professional skill allowed them to carry out their radical innovation. In time, some radical actions become accepted, part of the established order. Visionary landscape architects move on to other frontiers.

Changing Our Professional and Private Lives

Most of us play multiple political roles. We may be Servants for corporate avarice and Catalysts for cultural diversity at the same

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time. And we can change our professional lives as Karla Christensen, Associate ASLA, did when she left her comfortable life and set out for war-torn Bosnia, where she built playgrounds and rebuilt lives (see "Have Compassion, Will Travel," *Landscape Architecture*, November 2002). To really serve the landscape and higher public values, we must change the way we practice.

Likewise, our private lives must be transformed. It is too easy to ignore our own roles in unsustainability by blaming external forces. External and internal forces must be confronted. Agents for radical sustainability must live more sustainably themselves. The same can be said for those who advocate justice, active democracy, and diversity.

A Few Modest Suggestions for Landscape Architecture Education

The idea that design is separate from politics has roots in our present design education, and I'd like to conclude with a few suggestions.

First, there should be core courses in the politics of design that provide methods for teaching future landscape architects to operate in the face of power. The courses could openly address the aesthetics of social architecture and examine how divergent cultures can be celebrated in design and how bold collective action can be garnered. The courses might examine how formal landscape architecture and institutionalized injustices can be analyzed as matters of proportion, geometry, and form. They might debate Martin Luther King Jr., who said in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" that our concern for order (social and landscape architectural) renders justice secondary.

Second, we should never argue that specialization is an excuse for ignorance. With all our design specialization, more integration and complex, systemic thinking might foster greater political awareness and tools for activism among designers. The best way to acquire such tools is with joint, simultaneous degrees. One obvious combination is landscape architecture and environmental planning. Law,

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medicine, community development, psychology, anthropology, and political science are other logical partners to landscape architecture. More students should be encouraged to take advantage of joint degrees within colleges and around campus. Getting joint degrees should be made easier.

Third, we need to teach skills of politically intervening design. Landscape architecture students should know how to draw "on their feet," not just in private. This creates public discourse by allowing the designer to communicate ideas so the public can understand them, generate more, and collaborate in civic design. Everyone should know how to make justice maps, power maps, and social ecology maps. Everyone should know how to employ phenomenological techniques to capture cultural inspiration about place. These skills should be practiced in service-learning studios.

Fourth, educators and practitioners should cultivate optimism, not cynicism. Cynicism allows designers to retreat into the seemingly safe world of elitism, which directly serves the authorities who would stifle true self-expression. Optimism, coupled with complex integrated thinking, political skill, and design ability, allows us to be effective design activists, and then to know whom our design serves. When we know whose politics we style, maybe we will make a socially responsible difference.

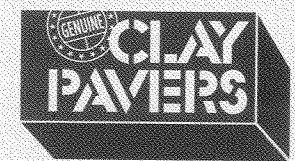
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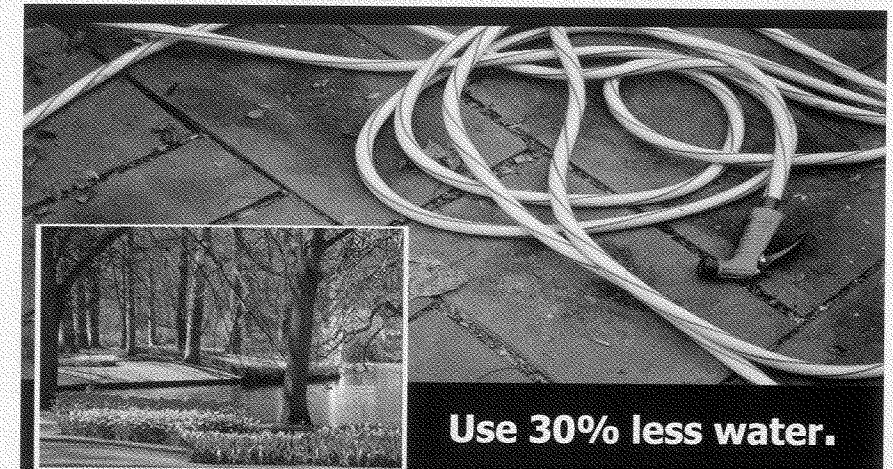
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