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Constructed Verticality
and the Landscape of the Belvedere

The connection between architecture and the landscape is undoubtedly inherent. We can personally witness this relationship in the most immediate of examples. However, if we continue to study, we might notice that what we see is not exactly a landscape, but more often a selection of plants, usually planted around the perimeter of buildings in order to ‘ground’ the building visually. If we stay longer and look closer, we might begin to feel as if what we are witnessing is not the landscape at all, but an oversimplification of garden trinkets, placed among a forest of buildings that seem to be asking for coverage; begging shelter from the mundane facade that has been oversimplified to extinction.

There are more natural landscapes where the relationship between architecture and the landscape provide the setting. Examples of this relationship can be found in our parks, wooded areas and preserves. However, even when we linger in nature, we begin to question if there is indeed a *relationship* as such, or if what we behold is a merely a reversal of the urban experience; a superficial experience of the built environment that ignores the power of the landscape wherein the structure lies.

Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* reminds us that often when a subject is so clearly embedded in the culture of humanity, it is often overlooked as “everybody uses it constantly and also already understands what is meant by it.”¹ He goes on to emphasize that it is explicitly those matters that we most take for granted that we need to go back and study.

¹ Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *Basic writings: from Being and time (1927) to The task of thinking (1964)*. New York: Harper & Row, 42.

He writes “A science’s level of development is determined by the extent to which it is capable of a crisis in its basic concepts.”². It is clear that Heidegger believed that we should look to our roots for the unveiling of ideas that have been covered up by our learned preconceptions, past and present culture, ideology and constant wave of emerging technology.

Even in 1927 when Heidegger was writing, there was a concern that emerging technology would simultaneously provide a more efficient lifestyle at the risk of neglecting our humanity in the process.

Today, we are not far from the same set of issues, especially concerning the relationship between architecture, landscape, technology and humanity. Technology has transformed the building industry into an efficient, streamlined cost effective machine that eliminates the critical design thinking that once went into building design. It is evident in our cities that we are losing cultural identity at the hands of a homogenized building industry.

The relationship between architecture and nature is one glaring instance in our modern existence that has experienced the utmost neglect. It has been overlooked as a primary concern, perhaps because we assume it will always be there and we take it for granted; or perhaps because the methodology of the building industry has compartmentalized the design process to the point that it has become a left over thought, no longer a holistic idea.

The primordial extent of our connection with nature is documented in the work of John Muir and further elaborated upon in recent work by naturalist Mike Houck who notes that people today simply do not have the vacation time and dispensable income necessary to travel to remote national parks like they used to. He calls for cities that people love, with integrated natural areas that can sustain wildlife and vegetation. He believes that we should integrate the built

² Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *Basic writings: from Being and time (1927) to The task of thinking (1964)*. New York: Harper & Row, 51.

environment with the parks, streams and natural areas found in many urban areas. The soundscape of the city is layered with machines, cars, birdsongs and running streams. When asked if this integration is really a priority he quotes Robert Michael Pyle who asks “What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known a wren?”³ There is growing appreciation for natural areas within our reach, easily accessible and ultimately more meaningful.

According to Heidegger, if we are to reveal a true and meaningful existence, we must look to the world around us. We must bring to light what has been covered in darkness and think about the meaning of things which humans encounter in “everydayness”.⁴ These are the subjects that are the most overlooked and taken for granted, the average and vague understanding of things that we have become so comfortable with.⁵

Heidegger’s methodology is to systematically peel away the layers of presupposition, until we are left with that which is essential to the being of the thing. He does this through the study of language, by breaking words down into their original components, to reveal an altogether inclusive meaning that has been deleted from society by layers of time.⁶

There is a primary connection to our place in the landscape, what it is we are looking to see and our underlying motives for being in nature to begin with. It is worthwhile to take a closer look at how our built environment interacts with the landscape. Andre Corboz said that the

³ Pyle, Robert Michael. *The Thunder Tree : Lessons from an Urban Wildland*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.

⁴ Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *Basic writings: from Being and time (1927) to The task of thinking (1964)*. New York: Harper & Row, 60.

⁵ Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *Basic writings: from Being and time (1927) to The task of thinking (1964)*. New York: Harper & Row, 46.

⁶ Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *Basic writings: from Being and time (1927) to The task of thinking (1964)*. New York: Harper & Row, 59.

belvedere is "the place where one goes to verify that the landscape really looks like a postcard".⁷ I loved this strange, but somehow sad and truthful statement about the relationship between human nature, architecture and the landscape when I was working on my masters and used it as a starting point for my masters research project in architecture six years ago.

Continuing with this preliminary research, I am presently looking at the detailed historical roots of the *belvedere* in hopes that this information will lead me to discover when and where the belvedere was first introduced to the United States. The object itself was once thought of almost exclusively as a part of a building. Meaning "beautiful view"⁸ in Italian, the belvedere literally and figuratively stands for the one place in the built environment made precisely as a connection to the landscape. I am also hoping that once I discover the historical lineage, it will lead to a more inclusive study about how we treat the modern American landscape in architecture.

For future research, the belvedere can also be the architectural catalyst through which I can talk about my other architectural interests such as ecotourism, brownfields, connection to the ground and meaningful existence in natural settings through built work.

In *Encounters with the Archdruid*, Brower writes "Roughly ninety percent of the earth has felt mans hand already, sometimes brutally, sometimes gently. Now let's say 'That's the limit.' We should go back over the the ninety and not touch the remaining ten percent. We should go back, and do better, with ingenuity. Recycle things. Loop the system."⁹

Architecture and landscape have the ability to act together, as a holistic synergy to evoke a sense of exploration and curiosity in its dwellers. Meaningful interaction between these two

⁷ Descombes, Raymond Shaffert and Georges. *Andre Corboz, "Au Fil De Chemin" Voie Suisse, L'itineneraire Genevois*. Geneva: Republique et Canton de Geneve, 1991.

⁸ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/belvedere>. Accessed February 2, 2010.

⁹ McPhee, John. 1971. *Encounters with the archdruid*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 84.

disciplines is critical and I propose that through literature, writing and thinking, there is a moment when we can gain insight that will influence the real decisions that come before us.

This research on the belvedere will hopefully be a tool that allows us to open up one more possibility in our architectural thinking and serve as a reminder to future generations of those elements of design that should not be forgotten or taken for granted. Meaningful built work in architecture and landscape can be the catalyst for future work in environmental stewardship, energy conservation and land use as well as more livable cities and more meaningful countrysides.

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