

Legible Landscape: Design Not Nature

-from Rene Bihan's UK Landscape Conference 2010_keynote presentation

Architecture, industrial design, and engineering are thought of as first tier professions and considered part of the elite design culture by the general public. Despite the important role landscape architects play in creating our outdoor and urban environments, even the best designed spaces recede into the background. Landscape architects need to take responsibility for the visibility and recognition of their profession, and address its shortcomings.

Rene Bihan is a practicing landscape architect with projects around the world. He is the managing principal for the San Francisco office of the globally renowned landscape design firm, SWA Group. His abrupt perspective is intended to spur his colleagues into action as advocates for the profession. In his keynote address to the UK Landscape Conference, the annual event of the national professional organization, Landscape Institute, Rene said, "It's unacceptable that we are often willing to let our landscapes disappear as an invisible narrative -- letting nature take over as author and authority. If we seek recognition and political capital then there is a responsibility for greater legibility in landscape design work. To secure political capital, landscape architects need to articulate clear and legible ideas."

Nature is dead. There are three types of landscapes: First Nature – Primordial landscape untouched by humans. Second Nature – landscape influenced by humans. And Third Nature – landscapes created by humans.

In the United States, there is still a prevalent cultural belief in Nature as a primordial, untouched, and uninhabited condition. The notion of Primordial landscape is a political myth which has contributed to the confusion in understanding Landscape. As people, we often struggle to see ourselves as a part of Nature and consequently we struggle to take responsibility for it. Second Nature would include places like working farms, fisheries, etc. However, most of the world is Third Nature, yet most people don't recognize the fact that almost all of our landscapes are created by humans. Even our National Parks System, which has preserved large tracts of the nation's most beautiful landscape, has been directly affected by the work of landscape architects, politicians, and planners. The Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the park boundaries, and the way the roads and trails meander through the open space and coincidentally lead hikers to the best views available, are all examples of Third Nature – Nature, as Americans understand it, is a controlled environment.

Context is both cultural and geographic. Culture plays a significant role in the perception of Landscape. The cultural ideas of landscape can be either valuable or outdated and inappropriate. They are helpful when paying homage to our traditions and history. But the US cultural ideal of a lush lawn is impractical and irresponsible in a desert and recreating an Italian garden in Texas does not relate to its place. Because of these cultural mindsets, well designed landscapes are often invisible landscapes. This is a conundrum for the profession. A landscape that ties in with its surrounding is often appropriate, but we need to still make people aware that they are in a designed environment.

This confusion is aided by the consumer model. Rene notes, "One of the negative effects of globalization is a generic pastiche in the landscape where there is complete disconnect between consumer products and the environment they are absorbed into. This global, non-contextual approach contributes to nostalgia about landscape, which quite often does more harm than good." Home Depot, Lowes and the other big box chain retailers that supply landscaping materials and plants sell the same products in Atlanta, Georgia as they do in Reno, Nevada despite radically different climates. This not only propagates the inclusion of thirsty plants like roses and lawns in arid landscapes and discourages water conserving landscapes; it diminishes the value and appreciation of the native species and surroundings.

So what should the profession do? Landscape architects should work in our own time and develop our landscapes based on a culture of ideas reflecting contemporary life. Landscape architecture should be made a commodity and given brand recognition. Landscapes should not shy away from making a statement. Landscapes should be useful. Landscapes should closely identify with Place. Landscapes should be innovative. Above all, Landscapes should be about the big idea.

Have strong ideas and think big.