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Grounding landscape urbanism and new urbanism

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Landscape urbanism developed in response to the dispersed, organic, and edgeless nature of contemporary urbanism. Whereas traditional urban form is assembled from rigid building blocks, cities in the 21st century appear more analogous to emergent ecological processes. The white space that separated and serviced buildings in traditional figure/ground plans is inverted to create green systems that structure—rather than react—to the built city. With this approach, landscape urbanism challenges the template for compactness propagated by new urbanism, which had in turn claimed city design in the 1980s from the retreat of modernism and the policy-focus of urban planning.

Each doctrine has presented valid critiques of the other. For instance, Andres Duany rightly protests that mediocre examples of landscape urbanism risk reintroducing the green buffer around modernist architecture, which will kill off the street-life that several generations of urbanists fought so hard to regain. Moreover, when viewed within the constellation of competing city design disciplines, it is likely that landscape urbanism is being used as a vehicle for architectural ambitions to leapfrog urban design and reclaim city planning. In addition, landscape urbanism is susceptible to misappropriation, as designers seeking to keep abreast of the avant-garde have freely retrospectively rebranded their projects as landscape urbanist.



New urbanism is also vulnerable as it struggles to evolve from its own dogma that was so successful at promulgating a coherent vision but leaves it less able to adapt to changes of circumstance and new ideas. New urbanism is undermined by idealized historicism, whereby the selective features of traditional settlements are sanitized of the grit, noise and overcrowding that created vibrant streets in the first place. The result is often under-populated middle-class dwellings with streets that are as empty as the 20th century urbanism that new urbanists revile. As part of this process, in the case of infill projects, less economically robust land-uses are inadvertently displaced to the periphery.

The net result is two approaches that work on their own terms but remain incompatible. This appears to perpetuate a 20th century urban dilemma; on the one hand, urbanism can be compact to minimize impact on the surrounding landscape, or on the other weave landscape and urbanism together over a larger area. This creates the urbanism equivalent of theoretical physics, where two stand-alone theories work at opposite scales. And just as physics ultimately aspires to reconcile relativity and quantum mechanics into a Theory of Everything, so too might the combining of landscape urbanism and new urbanism be understood as realizing a unified theory of urban design. Heins takes a step in this direction by presenting a useful argument for highlighting the common ground between the two.

There are indeed numerous grounds for conciliation. Walkable cities with contemporary, rather than nostalgic, design guidelines are a straightforward place to begin. Infusing cities with green infrastructure that is designed to directly contribute to city life rather than inertly buffer it is another strategy. Substituting freeways in dispersed cities with integrated, innovative, and flexible public transport systems is also appropriate to both versions of urbanism.

While developing this shared ground is undoubtedly valuable, we must also be wary of the negative impact of too much universality in urban design models. A conspicuous deficiency of landscape urbanism, new urbanism, and many of the other 'urbanisms' in circulation today, is

that they are already applied too universally to the detriment of local conditions and vernaculars. Why, for example are new urbanist design principles— derived largely from traditional cities sited on river floodplains in northern Europe and North America—incorporated verbatim into Australian urban policies, despite a local coastal vernacular having developed over two centuries, not to mention 50,000 years of indigenous inhabitation? Likewise, if landscape urbanism emerges from detailed mappings of local initial conditions, why do its urban visions appear so similar, whether sited in Singapore or Seattle?

To be sure, universally applicable solutions are a feature of our globally connected culture. To attract global flows of capital, cities became brands advertised with spectacle. In this context, each urban project is compelled to be spectacular, to stand out in the global depositories of hyper-real imagery. While this is common to all the design disciplines, the impacts are heightened when developing strategies for dwelling, as opposed to entertainment or consumable products. To remain credible, new urbanism and landscape urbanism must shed their dogma and slickness respectively. Urban designers should view both doctrines not as immutable formulas, but as frameworks to be adapted, mutated, sampled, and hybridized to suit local conditions. While the problems of sprawl may appear the same around the world, the most successful solutions are likely to be unique.

A final thought; as Heins points out, the fact that most extant landscape urbanism projects remain parks raises the question of whether landscape urbanism is an urban sub-discipline at all. Perhaps it is landscape architecture at its best, reinvigorated by revisiting its own canon and by absorbing the influence of architecture's foray into landscape and urban design. This rebranded landscape architecture has already influenced urban design by expanding the understanding of public space beyond streets and piazzas and demonstrating that green space holds so much more potential than mere parkland constituted as a bucolic backdrop. Where city planners may see a derelict site as a blank slate awaiting redevelopment, landscape

architect-urbanists are likely to demonstrate that it has unique innate qualities that can be propagated over time to the enrichment of city life. That is, a kind of practical amalgam between landscape and all the urbanisms—if not a discursive one—is already occurring in practice, on the ground.

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