Designed Ecologies FS 2015 V02

The term “Designed Ecologies”, originally coined by Kristina Hill and Kongjian Yu during their studies at the Harvard GSD, seeks to promote a new kind of global nature aesthetic in landscape architecture. It actually combines two terms that were formerly in opposition to each other. “Design” comes from the Latin word “designare” which means to mark-out and to choose. The French further added to that term notions of purpose and project. Today, design represents a conceptual activity involving the formulation of novel ideas that are expressed in visible form, and carried out into concrete action. It is about capturing a condition as well as conceiving and enhancing through it further qualities.

“Ecology” is a term coined by the German scientist Ernst Haeckel in the mid 19th Century. It is the study of interactions among organisms and their environment where biotic relationships between species are affected by the immediate abiotic environment. The word comes from the Greek “oikos” meaning house, and the word “logia” meaning to study of. Ecology is about the many “houses” of nature that are studied and designated by man. The combination of the two words into the term Designed Ecologies points to the practical applications of landscape ecology in conservation, restoration ecology, and natural resource management.

The idea is to enable organisms and resources to maintain biophysical feedback mechanisms in an ecosystem that regulates and moderates processes acting on both biotic and abiotic components. Designed Ecologies are meant to restore a semblance of natural equilibrium in areas that have often been depleted of their original natural habitat. It is an artificial construct of nature that is in tune with our times and expresses plainly our environmental condition.

Pioneer countries like America, Canada and China have been at the forefront of this new global trend in landscape design where restoration of local biodiversity had the priority. One of the first examples of a designed ecology proposal was the Downsview Park competition in Toronto at the turn of the 21st Century where teams competed to design a new ecological city park on the remains of an old airbase of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. But today, the most interesting and proactive Designed Ecologies are certainly coming from China. The office Turenscape under the leadership of Kongjian Yu in Beijing has proposed radically new forms of urban parks that can treat very polluted water, and allow for a return to nature. Although the new park forms have been controversial within traditional Chinese landscape circles, it has led to a significant design revolution where landscape architecture has embodied the “remaking” of nature becoming one of the main national priorities in China at the present time.
Designed Ecologies are for the most part detached from the cultural context of a given place. They do not seek inspiration from history or traditions of the past, but invent new forms of nature instead, breaking away from more traditional forms of aesthetics. Their starting point is more often the terrain vague, the industrial wasteland and other places of dejection. It represents a tipping point where landscape architecture is asked to fabricate and reinvent nature almost entirely.

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Literature:


Czerniak, Julia [ed.]: Downsview Park Toronto (CASE), New York 2002.


