

Radical Landscapes: Reinventing Outdoor Space

J. Amidon (foreword by K. Gustafson)

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This book, first published in 2001, is now available in paperback. A great array of recent projects from around the world is presented in its seven chapters. The author tackles the word 'radical' at the outset by juxtaposing it with the term 'avant-garde' (p. 7). The latter is dismissed as a stultifying, oppositional force that "consciously rejects the traditions of its genre". In contrast the radical constitutes "the provocative push that moves us forward... [It] is an outgrowth of today's trends into tomorrow's realities." With some excitement the author muses on the position of the word 'radical' in present-day dictionaries: it nestles between 'radiation sickness' and 'radicchio' (p. 7). The fact that it appears perilously close to the word 'radiator' goes unmentioned. This is an unfortunate oversight because there is plenty of hot air in this book.

This is brilliantly demonstrated by the explanation given of Dani Karavan's *Vivaio Per la Pace (Nursery for Peace)* located in the Piazza del Duomo, Pistoia, Italy (1999). Amidon describes it in the following words:

Set upon a wooden platform at the square's centre, the geometrically sectored, severely defined landscape vignette appears to hover over the piazza's ancient stone pavement. Karavan's scheme is a personal story, a memory of his father's impromptu tree nursery in the atrium of his childhood home. It is also a celebration of the city's nursery and a call to peace among fractious parties and unsettled nations. (p. 109)

Karavan – a Paris-based Israeli – is described as a "master of political sculpture" (p. 177). It is averred that his work is "always placing man (sic) with his rights and duties – within the context of a radically new aesthetic – at the center of life" (Giuliano Gori, cited p. 177). This is an especially unfortunate turn of phrase when read in conjunction with a photograph of his *Nursery for Peace* (p. 123). It was taken by Karavan himself, and can therefore be understood as akin to an authorial interpretation. It is an aerial view of the work and features 17 people of all ages. Not

one of them is looking at the Nursery for Peace. Some have their back to it as they sit on its edge with their feet dangling over the edge. One child is running on it, but he too faces away in readiness to jump off. Further away can be seen other people perched precariously on a low, railed stone wall running along the perimeter of the square. To judge from the photograph there appears to be a notable lack of seating. Is this really one of the “spectacular confrontations between environment and creativity” (p. 123) that Karavan (that ‘master of political sculpture’) seeks? Perhaps it would have been more *radical* to put aside this fanciful ‘call to peace’ and actually provide somewhere comfortable to sit?

Amidon appears to make a subtle criticism of Karavan’s *Nursery for Peace* by describing it as “a curiously disembodied garden experience” (p. 109). She later concedes that, although “the idea of a nursery for peace is whimsical”, nevertheless “philosophically it has deep roots and robust associations” (p. 124). This is the closest we get to any form of critical analysis, even though the author states that “a garden text has meaning only in relation to other, changing texts; the sole pretext is ambitious interpretation” (p. 109). ‘Ambitious interpretation’ is sadly absent from this book.

In the introduction it is claimed (quite correctly) that “[p]lace-making is a social process” (p. 9). But there is scant evidence of that procedure in the projects that follow. Take Maya Lin’s aesthetically beautiful *Wave Field* at the University of Michigan, USA (1995). It consists of an undulating lawn that has the ingenious effect of rippling as though made of water. Unsurprisingly this inviting terrain “encourages visitors to wander through and even sit on the grassy waves” (p. 43). Yet in the photographs the place is pristine and there is not a single person in evidence. This sense of desertion is true for nearly every single image in the book.

Lin’s design, as with many others in this publication, is to be looked at, not used. There is little sense of the living character of the spaces. This is unfortunate to say the least, especially given that “the most intriguing and most confounding aspect of landscape design is the phenomenon of continual change” (p. 80). This includes growth and decay in addition to “the effects of human behaviour over time”. Whilst the former can be largely foreseen, the latter is far more unpredictable.

Yet there are few examples that seem to embrace change. Equally, there is a strong sense that the vast majority of these works have been dropped into the requisite site. Where is the consultation – the much-vaunted ‘dialogue’ (p. 9) – which helps shape the ideas? Have the communities that must accept these designs been asked what they want? How have the spaces actually been used? Instead all we get is the totally biased ‘project literature’ blurb (p. 109).

An exception is Bloemenhof Park in Johannesburg, South Africa (1998), conceived by, amongst others, Fiona Garson, Jan Hofmeyr and Hannah le Roux (pp.136-139, 186). Amidon quaintly describes its location as being in “a fragile part of town” (p. 135). The designers had the revolutionary (at least in the context of this book) idea of “observing conditions surrounding the square”. They provided barbecues in the shape of warthogs as well as seating. The main feature was a skateboard rink that encouraged “graffiti and other forms of public interaction” (p. 135). The project was, however, seriously curtailed by funding restrictions and it became “threatened... by political forces much stronger than the community of users who value its presence” (p. 135).

Amidon states that the Bloemenhof Park project “raises an interesting ambiguity that haunts our public spaces: at what point does a much-used, much-needed patch of ground in a neighbourhood gain support, and then funding, as a legitimate expression of civic values?” (p. 135). This book raises a vital question. And it totally fails to answer it. I for one would have welcomed a far longer examination of this “‘social sink’ of decay and low civic morale” (p. 139) than Dani Karavan’s frankly ludicrous “idea of putting anger aside and striving together for peace” (p. 109).

Featuring over 400 illustrations (the bulk in colour), *Radical Landscapes* serves as a mildly diverting coffee-table tome. It is claimed that the book’s graphic designers (like the landscape architects to which it refers) “employ innovative formal arrangements, but do not abandon legibility or structural clarity” (p. 56). In reality, all this means is that some paragraphs have a daringly diagonal margin. Meanwhile, the font size is so minuscule that it would challenge even the keenest-eyed reader. It affords no space to adequately analyse the projects. Instead the author has decided to give spurious ‘titles’ to each of the works described. The Bloemenhof Park is thus

rather curiously labelled 'SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST' (p. 136), whilst Maya Lin's *Wave Field* is painfully preceded by 'THE FLUID DYNAMICS OF TERRA FIRMA' (p. 43). A possible clue to the actual function of this book can be found in the long list of contact details for the various firms mentioned, for this publication can be interpreted as a glossy piece of advertising. The tiny texts amount to puffs for the companies that commissioned and executed these execrable attempts at 'radicalism'.

My hostility towards this book is because it masquerades under the bogus title of '*Radical Landscapes*'. It claims nothing less than the *reinvention* of 'outdoor space'. The fact that it avoids the term 'public space' is telling. Many of the places described are corporate enclaves or that peculiar class of private-public domain which demands a particular form of comportment. The inadequacies of this book constitute a damning indictment of why the environments in which we live and work are perennially stifling and restrictive. Amidon apparently concedes as much: "At present, most contemporary place-making falls short of creating radically new contextual frames" (p. 108).

Moreover, if Karavan's vapid *Nursery for Peace* can be construed as a 'radical landscape', what on earth does a 'conservative landscape' look like? One wonders if the recently completed Diana Memorial Fountain in Hyde Park, London can be considered 'radical'? The mediocre parameters of this book suggest that it can, especially given that it was co-designed by Kathryn Gustafson (author of the foreword to *Radical Landscapes*). The £3.6 million memorial had to be closed shortly after its inauguration because of damage wrought by the dim-witted public, some of whom had the effrontery to paddle in the water. The injuries they sustained provide a droll riposte to the fountain's 'Reaching Out – Letting In' concept (see <http://www.gustafson-porter.com>). This outcome confirms that these fragile, pretty places do not have the robustness to withstand either use or alternative interpretation. The latter is especially important given the inherent didacticism of the 'crafted landscape' (p. 9).

Amidon's immediate dismissal of the 'avant-garde' was faulty, for it is at least as likely to reveal the textual meaning of a place as the 'radical' landscapes of the sort described in this book. One thinks of the 'Reclaim the Streets' protest in London's

Parliament Square of 1 May 2000. Easily dismissed as mindless ‘vandals’, they at least *used* this strangely overlooked space. Might they have been responding to the “‘text’ [of Parliament Square] in a meaningful way” (p. 108)? They scrawled graffiti on the monuments and draped a grass mohican over the bronze pate of Winston Churchill. This was genuinely “unconventional exploration” (p. 9) “interceding in previously invisible processes” (p. 80) of commemoration and control in an overtly political space. Anticipating trouble, the authorities had drenched the square with water in an attempt to dissuade the protestors from gathering there. Yet this had the inadvertent effect of facilitating their ‘guerrilla gardening’ during which they planted such staple crops as potatoes and cannabis. This was radicalism of a sort that is almost entirely absent from this seriously deficient book.

Stuart Burch

Nottingham Trent University, UK