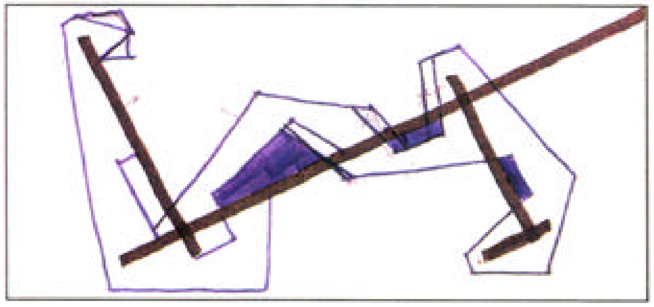
PROSPECT

BY DEAN CARDASIS

Drawing the landscape occupies far too important a position in landscape architectural education. While it is true that drawing can aid us in thinking, imagining and communicating about the landscape, for students and many professionals the production of drawings has become the end toward which they work.



What these drawings have to do with built landscapes is frequently incidental, since their relation to the materials and methods that directly create and sustain landscape is not stressed in most schools. Instead, the drawing itself is.

It is fair to say that our schools handle a mammoth task in providing basic education in a field as broad and complex as landscape architecture. Nonetheless, there is a cost associated with isolating students in a petri dish of studios and construction classes in their formative years, during which time they evolve a method of addressing the landscape through drawing alone. The cost, as the late James Rose put it, is that "Landscape architects are forever mistaking the map for the territory." We should remember that many great landscape architects, including Rose, Olmsted, Steele, Church, and others, had little, if any, drawing skill. Conversely, we all know students and professionals whose drawing skills are excellent, yet they can't make a good landscape space. We must recognize that designing, making and caring for landscapes is all part of the same process. If drawing is to continue to be used by us in our thinking, imagining and communicating about landscape, we must begin in the schools to connect drawing to real construction and maintenance materials and processes, and stop being so distracted by drawing itself.

In accepting the corporate architects' model of professional practice, wherein all design decisions, whether conceptual or detail-related, are made on paper in advance in a room away from the site, we lose the vitality that can result from the direct interaction of a landscape architect with a site. Although this model is the norm for contemporary professional practice (outside of design/build), it is especially problematic for the landscape architect, since direct response to the land is what stimulates design (for most of us), and since the landscape itself is so dynamic.

There is more vitality in a landscape formed by a farmer plowing a field or a child playing in the mud than there is in most professionally designed landscapes. The former are expressions of the direct, honest, imaginative response of people to the land, whereas the landscape architect has been trained primarily to draw without grappling with the relationship of drawings to the actual making of and caring for landscapes. On some projects today, artists who work directly with their materials are attached to the design team to provide this vitality. But landscape architecture, when practiced with the knowledge of its relation to drawing, and with direct, spontaneous interaction with the land, is its own art. Do we really want to lose this?

I believe one reason the work of Rose, Olmsted, Church and Steele was so successful is that they contrived to find a way to practice in this manner. Rose provides an instructive example. Expelled from Harvard in 1936 for refusing to do Beaux-Arts designs, Rose took the models (not drawings) for which he had received failing grades to *Pencil Points* (now *Progressive Architecture*) magazine, and was rewarded with a two-year contract.

That arrangement yielded some of the most significant theoretical explorations of the then-emerging modern movement in landscape architecture, including one important article on landscape models in which Rose wrote: "By working in plan and section only, the landscapist cannot approach the real problem, which is to integrate materials with design in a three-dimensional relation."

Rose made his case for the limitations of working with drawings in theory and practice. In the 1940s and ′50s, he continued to work with models and drawings and directly on sites of garden designs for private clients. During this time, Rose produced a number of amazing gardens. His drawings of these irregular interlocking spaces, while simplistic by most standards, demonstrate an understanding of the complex spatial meaning in the gardens they describe.

Rose eventually abandoned drawing almost altogether. According to Eleanore Petterson, a Frank Lloyd Wright apprentice with whom Rose frequently collaborated, Rose would come to her with abstract sketches that reminded her of Franz Kline's abstract-expressionist paintings (see illustration above). Sometimes these sketches were on the backs of envelopes, and Petterson, with her staff and Rose's guidance, would translate them into site plans acceptable to planning authorities. Even then, Rose, who always supervised the construction, had arranged things so that he was free to improvise on the site.

In his last works, Rose would, if requested, draw his design directly on the land, but in his contracts he always reserved the right to improvise. He decried preconceiving design on the land in favor of providing a general direction, and maintaining his freedom to interact directly with his materials: earth, plants, water, rocks, and structures¾ not paper.

For the maverick Rose, design on the land, like life, was an adventure. The vitality and spatial clarity of his built landscapes reveal the merits of his approach. While his methods may not work for all landscape architects, it is important to understand, as Rose did, the relationship between working directly with the land and drawing¾ or any representation of landscape. Equally important is for landscape architects to refuse¾ as any artist in any medium would¾ to relinquish the opportunity for direct, spontaneous interaction with our medium.

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