

This article appeared in *Harvard Design Magazine*, Fall 2004/Winter 2005, Number 21. To order this issue or a subscription, visit the HDM homepage at <<http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/hdm>>.

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## Not Unlike Life Itself

*Landscape Strategy Now*

by **James Corner**

### **The notion of “design intelligence,” defined by Michael**

Speaks as “practices [that] allow for a greater degree of innovation because they encourage opportunism and risk-taking rather than problem solving,” (1) is pertinent to this particular moment and fundamental, I believe, to the advancement and larger cultural efficacy of landscape architecture, architecture, and urban design. The idea of strategy, more generally, invokes the art of engagement, typically in battles, but also in any activity that requires a certain finesse, careful positioning, and intelligent, informed, coordinated actions to ensure success (advantage rather than disadvantage, survival rather than death). However, to think solely in terms of ends is perhaps not accurate, for a good strategy remains dynamic and open and thereby assures its own longevity. It is more conversational and engaging than it is confrontational or assertive. A good strategy is a highly organized plan (spatial, programmatic, or logistical) that is at the same time flexible and structurally capable of significant adaptation in response to changing circumstances. Too rigid a strategy will succumb to a surprise or to a logic other than that for which it was designed, and too loose a strategy will succumb to anything more complex or to anything more highly organized and better coordinated.

Life scientists will tell you that a resilient system must be both robust and open. Such suppleness is essential for successful adaptation, which is in turn necessary for survival in an evolving open system. In order to grow and develop, life forms must both persist and adapt, their organizational structures sufficiently resilient to withstand challenges while also supple enough to morph and reorganize. These principles are as topical today in business and management as they are in biology and ecology, urbanism and the design of public space. And, importantly, these principles describe not only pathways and processes but also specific forms of organization, specific arrangements, configurations and relational structures that are essential for constructing both resilient and adaptive capacities. In this case, a “fitness landscape” is one best disposed toward and best adapted to certain conditions. It is both healthy (or

physically fit) and synthetically symbiotic (or “fitting”) because of its specific organizational and material form. Now, because architectural, landscape, and urban projects are inevitably formal (both geometrical and material), durational (subject to time and process), and complex (subject to multiple forces and relations), strategy is fundamental to contemporary design practices.

Moreover, the increased marginalization of design from public life—architecture and landscape are valued more as symbolic, aesthetic, or emblematic works rather than as modes of practice directed toward larger urban issues, physical planning, and social/public improvement—necessitates a stocktaking of the field, a revamping of professional orientation toward future practices. In an increasingly unregulated, dispersed, global, and pluralistic world, projects have become more complicated, more difficult to pull off, more difficult to maintain in quality. Without kings, autocratic presidents, singular corporate leaders, or similarly-single-minded “clients with power and authority,” it is very difficult to produce significantly innovative work, especially at a larger, urban scale. The kind of ad-hoc, inclusionist populism that passes as participatory public process today typically leads to dull projects, bland politics, and general cultural inertia.

Now, not wanting to return to hierarchical societies and wanting instead to more fully, effectively, innovatively engage urban public life in the realization of complex projects, how exactly might one act professionally?

### LANDSCAPE, ECOLOGY, AND PROPAGATION

Both landscape and ecology serve as useful strategic models for three primary reasons: 1) they accept the often messy and complex circumstances of the given site, replete with constraints, potentials, and realities, and they have developed techniques—mapping, diagramming, planning, imaging, arranging, and so on—for both representing and working with the seemingly unmanageable or inchoate complexities of the given; 2) they both address issues of large-scale spatial organization and relational structuring among parts, a structuring that remains open and dynamic, not fixed; and 3) they both deal with time open-endedly, often viewing a project more in terms of cultivation, staging, and setting up certain conditions rather than obsessing on fixity, finish, and completeness. Landscape and ecology understand projects as dynamic, grounded temporalities, as context-specific unfoldings—becomings, durational emergences, themselves seeding potentials that go on to engender further sets of effect and novelty. Landscape architects tend to view the specificity of a given site—its environment, culture, politics, and economies—as a program unto itself, a program that has an innate tendency or propensity with regard to future potentials. This is why practices of agriculture, silviculture, horticulture, and other techniques of adaptive management of material systems is so interesting and pertinent to urbanism.

Subsequently, once seeded, set up, or staged, ecological succession presents one site state that establishes the conditions for the next, which in turn overwrites the past and precipitates a fu-

ture, not necessarily in foreseeable or prescribable ways. In a sense, the landscape project is less about static, fixed organizations than it is about—to borrow biologist Stuart Kauffman's terms—“propagating organizations,” provisional sets of structures that perform work to construct more of themselves in order to literally propagate more diverse and complex lifeworlds. I use *lifeworld* intentionally here to invoke imaginative, programmatic, and urban, as well as the natural or biological, dimensions.

A single cell or unit working to produce a second copy from small building blocks is literally propagating not only an organization of material but also an organization of process, a process that goes on to gradually construct increasingly diverse sets of emergent forms, generating novelty, distinctive forms, and programs that never existed before. Self-constructing organization propagates and evolves—our globe is covered by propagating organizations—life and its consequences.

In design terms, landscapes and field organizations set up the conditions for life to evolve. Any landscape configuration inevitably has an inherent potentiality. Design strategy involves understanding that potentiality and shaping or deploying form in order to maximize effects. The notion of a propagating organization is totally enmeshed in unfolding the potentials of real things over time. The evolution of circumstances in fact renews potentials and hence the efficacy of the disposition.

### DISPOSITIONS: MATERIALITY, FORM AND DESIGN

This brings me to my third point: Design practices that are contextually responsive, temporal and open-ended, adaptive and flexible, and ecologically strategic do not imply that formal, material precision is irrelevant. Proponents who argue for strategy over form, for strategic modes of practice over formal, material practices, or even for a kind of objective naturalism over subjective creativity are misguided. First, as landscape architects, architects, and urban designers, we give physical shape and form to the world—geometry and material are fundamental. We draw from strategy and from various disciplines that deploy strategic and organizational thinking not to become master strategists per se but rather to find greater efficacy and potential for the physical reshaping of our world. Strategic technique—research, survey, mapping, projecting, decentralizing, bundling, networking, testing, shaping, sounding-out, and so on—are of enormous value to designers trying to expand the scope and efficacy of their work. At the same time, however, form, geometry, and material are precisely the physical media, the substrate if you will, through which any strategy plays itself out. In other words, there is no general strategy of battle, only a specific unfolding of battle as dictated or afforded by the specific contours and local conditions of a particular terrain.

Similarly, in designing pathways, corridors, patches, fields, matrices, meshworks, boundaries, surfaces, mats, membranes, sections, and joints—each configuration highly specific in dimension, material, and organization—we are constructing a dynamic expanding field, literally a machinic stage for the performance of life, for the propagation of more life, and for

the emergence of novelty. In other words, arguments for staging uncertainty, for indeterminacy and open-endedness, for endless scenario gaming and datascaping—in fact anything to do with the whole notion of free flexibility and adaptation—do not make sense in a world without specific material form and precise design organizations.

The very performance of life is dependent upon a highly organized material matrix, a landscape ecology both robust and adaptable, strategic by virtue of its material cunning in diversification and survival. Fluid, pliant fields—whether wetlands, cities, or economies—are able to absorb, transform, and exchange information with their surroundings. Their stability and robustness in handling and processing movement, difference and exchange derives from their organizational configuration, their positioning, their arrangement, and relational structuring: in sum, their “design intelligence.”

Contemporary urban projects demand a new kind of synthetic imagination—a new form of practice in which architecture, landscape, planning, ecology, engineering, social policy, and political process are both understood *and* coordinated as an inter-related field. The synthesis of this range of knowledge bases and its embodiment in public space lies at the heart of a strategic landscape practice. Working inclusively and collaboratively across multiple scales and with broad scope, strategic design intelligence can surely move toward a more effective and powerful form of urban design. But while strategic thinking aids design intelligence, it is design intelligence that ultimately gives shape and form to the grounds—the very landscape substrate (or the fuller environment more broadly)—that both supports and instigates future emergent forms and novel effects. In this sense, both strategy and design are crucial for evolving new forms, new programs, new publics, new natures, and new urbanisms. That's design intelligence, with its broad reach and its extraordinary creativity, not unlike life itself. □

#### NOTES

1. Michael Speaks, “Theory was interesting . . . but now we have work” *arq* 6/2, “perspective,” June 26, 2002.

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