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A Postmodern Landscape

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Homeowners often want a landscape to conform to what the media says an outdoor space should look like. The space is then designed according to a view which is manufactured in media representations. Images of reality are therefore blurred in modern life, which is a view some would call postmodernist. Postmodernism places importance on the constructed image or symbol as the reality.

The 19th century picturesque landscape view was the first early design theory in American landscape. Both Frederick Law Olmsted and before him horticulturalist Andrew Jackson Downing proselytized this view. The extensive lawn with a tree here and there offered an escape from daily life. The landscape was something to admire. The lines were straight. The outdoor scene was something that the actor does not participate in, but enjoys just contemplating. Thus the 19th century produced the public park with its walkways and park benches.

In the 1930s James C. Rose, Daniel Kiley, and Garrett Eckbo were important American modernists in landscape design. Their new view of landscape is one in which the actor becomes involved. It is not a landscape to admire from afar, but one in which the viewer participates. Plants, structures, and water features all serve the need of the actor. The garden becomes a room and part of the house. There are no longer straight lines leading to a central axis, but rather an asymmetry that encourages more involvement. Eckbo said, “Our theory of landscape design for the balance of the twentieth century must be concerned with the realities of the now engrossing problems of the overall outdoor environment of the American people, rather than with abstractions about systems of axes, or poetic subjectivities about nature.”

Just as the modernist view resulted in a rejection of the picturesque, a new view now called the postmodern has been applied to landscape, thus replacing the modernist approach. For the postmodernist there is no such thing as “the” way to do anything. Individuals and communities construct their own truth in ways that are significant to them. The viewer makes sense of the landscape in the context of earlier cultural experiences in which signs and symbols of power, wealth, status, and beauty, derived primarily from media images, are all important.

Today what people want in the landscape of a home, a mall, a restaurant or even an outside bar is the image of what the media present to them as important. In the capitalist world, built artifacts, whether houses or malls, are business products meant to bolster the fortunes of their builders. So the icons in constructing a space become ones familiar from the media.
A POSTMODERN LANDSCAPE

THOMAS J. MICKEY

Three strategies of post-modern design are: simulation, staged authenticity, and pastiche. Simulation refers to a fake world that references an exotic locale like Disneyland's Main Street. Legend, stereotype, and previous simulations are the source.

Staged authenticity claims to reconstitute something truly authentic. Boston's Faneuil Hall is staged authenticity. Though completely manufactured, it sits on historic land.

Pastiche means the use of cultural artifacts or figures to stimulate greater buying by the consumer. It is meant to divert and entertain. The boats in the water at the Venetian casino in Las Vegas are an example. They are real boats but in a completely artificial environment, constructed to give pleasure to gambling.

One might call a postmodernist landscape an absurd landscape. The absurd landscape is a humorless, intensely serious commodity that can be processed, treated, decorated like any other commodity, and often completely disposable.

Marina Bay, an oceanside community in the northeast section of Quincy, boasts the largest marina in the northeast. It enjoys a view of the Boston skyline. Known for its spectacular sunsets, Marina Bay has a boardwalk with several restaurants and shops. The outside bar called Waterworks is open from Memorial Day until Labor Day.

Waterworks' website describes itself in these words: "The northeast's largest and most exciting outdoor entertainment complex provides the ideal location for your corporate, school or social event. With a volleyball court, state of the art stage, lighting & sound, authentic Barbecue and the only palm tree grove in New England, we'll create an ideal afternoon or evening of recreation and dining!"

The palm trees in the landscape are the important feature for this essay. Waterworks' use of these plants will provide the material evidence for coding the landscape postmodernist.

In May the bar trucks in three dozen palm trees from Florida. They are then anchored in the soil on the grounds of the bar. They are used around the 60,000 square foot Waterworks property. The trees may need to be tied to stakes if they are very large trees. At the end of the season the trees are cut down and disposed of in a large dumpster brought to the property.

The photograph on page 19 shows two trees resting on a wooden rail in the back parking area next to Waterworks. The trees are 25 feet high. The roots are covered with a tarp.

The photograph above presents a view of the outdoor bar with some of the palm trees in place with the ocean in the distance. This is the typical scene all summer when the bar attracts hundreds of customers, especially on the weekend. The local community refers to the bar as a "twenty something hangout" and has often been critical of the loud music coming from the bar.

After the summer is over, the palm trees are cut down and taken away. The photograph at the top of page 21 shows the bar, its name Waterworks prominent in the front, but with no palm trees. They have all been removed to ready the property for winter. The only remaining trees are the evergreens, which, of course, can withstand the winter freeze and will still be on the site for next spring's reopening.

The final photograph shows the disposal of the trees. The palm branches from the cut-down trees rest on the sides of a large trash bin, which has been placed directly next to the bar's delivery area. The trees are entangled in trash like discarded pieces of wood, cardboard, and plastic. Within a day or so the dumpster is removed with no sign of the palm trees in the landscape other than the stumps.

The patron knows the bar is a business and the trees may be real, but this place with its exotic trees gives the sense of both simulation and authenticity. A patron might say, “It’s not real but it’s what I expect a tropical bar to look like.”

The elements in the landscape include the large bar at the back of the property, the stage which features live music, a large dance area, a barbecue spot, and outside tables. Also on the side of the bar is a sandy area for volleyball. Several pathways connect one space to another.
The plants include yucca, evergreen, grasses, annuals, and the palm trees. A northern climate like New England cannot winter over a tropical plant like a palm tree. The choice of this tree variety violates environmental concerns about the use of ornamentals in the landscape because they are not native plants. A central issue here, however, is that the plant is a tree, and not an annual like a 12-inch marigold.

The patron who encounters the trees in the landscape may sense the absurdity of it all. How could he/she be in the Boston area outdoors and in the midst of palm trees? In that sense one might refer to the landscape as postmodern: constructed to give the experience of another climate. The tree is a symbol, derived from the media, of what tropical means (e.g., ads for rum often have a tropical island as an image). It’s a representation of a representation.

The choice of palm trees plays into the media image of what ‘tropical’ means. Though tropical can be expressed in many ways, the landscape designer wants to use the expectations of the actor in the scene. In a postmodern approach to landscape design the media dictate the choice of plant material.

Finally, the patron has no idea of what happens to the palm trees at the end of the season. The plants become disposable.

Technology of course has made the delivery of these trees from a warm climate to a cold climate possible. A postmodern view of landscape proposes an increased control over nature symbolized in these palm trees.

If one accepts the argument that a landscape design incorporates the cultural values of a period, the choice of palm trees in a bar located in a northern climate is not far fetched. Modern capitalism presents the iconography today, especially through the media. Waterworks is simply responding to what the media represents as tropical.

In the choice to use palm trees on the site, the three iconographic strategies proposed by Sternberg were incorporated: simulation, staged authenticity, and pastiche. Simulation refers to the palm trees as an artificial environment that was created by the landscape designer to look real. Staged authenticity means the trees were planted as a tree should be, but they were put in a commercial area whose use for them would be only three months. Pastiche refers to the choices in the landscape to encourage greater buying on the part of the consumer. In this case the feeling that one would get in this setting of being in the tropics would hopefully increase sales, because it is “the only bar like it on the East coast.”

Before the onslaught of media icons came from a culture’s tradition and history. Today icons of landscape may come from liquor and travel advertising. Thus in postmodernism media icons can become the motivation for landscape design.

—Thomas J. Mickey is Professor of Communication Studies