

Public Space as Landscape Experience of Happiness: A Surprise Public Garden amidst Water and Large Blocks of Woodland

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Public Space as Landscape Experience of Happiness

Urban public space is not a phenomenon of the twenty first century. It originated with the public parks of the mid-nineteenth century which were a considerable part of the urban fabric (Chadwick, 1966). Urban parks and open spaces always represented a significant resource in cities and were considered as the best means to promote the health, longevity and comfort of their inhabitants. The belief that public green spaces were inherently beneficial to the health of people arose from a theory evolved by doctors in the late eighteenth century, the so-called theory of miasma. The theory held that all disease was due to bad air, and it fostered the belief that access to fresh air could reduce the incidence of disease. Open green spaces, consequently, were looked upon literally as the lungs of the city, providing physical health and mental wellbeing. The impact of this theory has been far reaching and has succeeded in establishing a concern for the design and layout of urban green areas as an important restorative environment even to the present day proving that the man/nature relationship is an ancient correlation that has always been essential to human existence (Carmona et al, 2003). Recent research studies find strong correlations between access to urban green public spaces, parks, plazas, or even pocket parks and increased levels of physical health, mental well being and happiness. Landscape space has a very real impact on how we feel. The most striking finding of such studies is the fact that happiness is more strongly correlated to green space than socioeconomic status. Also, psychologists are experimenting with new research that discusses the way landscape and aesthetics affect our decisions, emotional responses and the way we feel about ourselves.

The pattern, shape, texture, light and color of the landscape work together to influence how we feel and how we perform, both consciously and subconsciously (Bell, 2012). Human beings have a myriad of emotional responses to aesthetics and landscape space confirming the French writer's Stendhal observation that: "Beauty is the promise of happiness." Different versions of beauty through the various combinations of various landscape aesthetic elements employed in the landscape design schemes of public spaces provide different visions of happiness and joyful experiences (De Botton, 2008). Landscape architects are consequently concerned with basic questions such as: How much and what kind of nature is needed in public spaces in order to nurture both mind and body? What combination of natural experiences will deliver the need for meaningful places to the intellectual, emotional and physical development of their users? What landscape design tools and strate-

gies will be most effective at ensuring that we create public spaces inclusive and welcoming for all?

To escape the stress, depression and anxiety of urban centers, more and more urban residents take refuge in such spaces and consider them as a potent remedy to many of the environmental, economic, and emotional challenges presented by urban living. Green spaces in urban centers are essential to building healthy, livable cities. What is common across all countries today is the desire to improve quality of life for residents through a close collaboration of all disciplines involved in the design of public space in order to introduce people into new patterns of movement within the urban fabric, help them understand the impact that the urban environment can have on their attitudes, actions and lives, and engage them daily to enjoy, visit and celebrate the various forms of nature found in the urban environment (Gehl, 2010). To address such an attitude

toward the design of our public space, a new approach to urbanism has arisen, the so called "biophilic" urbanism, which is based on the assumption that contact with nature from trees and parks to vertical gardens and green rooftops, as well as from birds to wildflowers and water is absolutely essential to modern urban life if we want to be happier, more relaxed, and more productive (Bell, 2012). It is becoming increasingly clear in our societies that nature is not optional but essential. Many cities around the world are exploring many creative ways in which urban environments integrate nature and cultural identity, through research and design development and thereby creating healthy livable cities which may be considered as a true mark of civilization (Sepe, 2013).

A Surprise Public Garden amidst Water and Large Blocks of Woodland as a Model for the Development of Urban Green Space



The designed platforms close to the water and overlooking both the archipelago and the natural woodland ecosystem beyond serve as enclosed garden courtyards for stasis, relaxation and contemplation

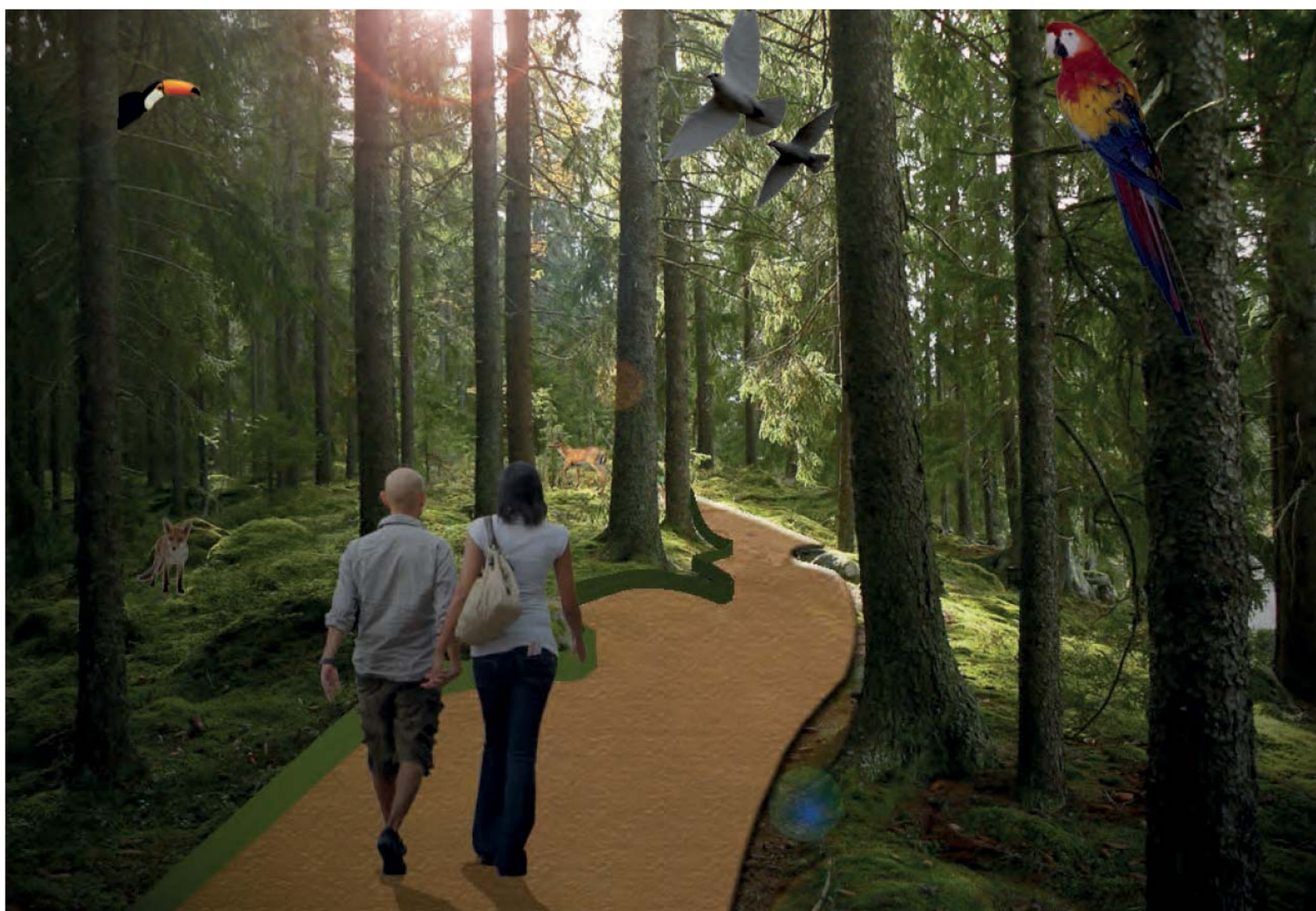
Human affection towards urban green spaces emanates from our need for nature, to provide us with the reminder that we are connected with the land from the very first moments of our lives. We need to take off our shoes on occasion, walk in the grass, smell the earth and feel the warmth of the sun. And we need the open air with room to stretch as well. Public space has always been a primary measure of quality within the urban fabric as evidenced through history. Designed landscapes are important parts of our environment; they affect our experiences, feelings, memories, and ultimately the lives we live. Therefore, to explore the connection between landscape architecture and the human experience through geometries and materiality is a serious design task (Whiston-Spirn, 2000).

The suggested ecological concept of urban green space is a series of gardens by the water edge connected through a network of

footpaths with large blocks of woodland, creating therefore a natural framework at the city's waterfront perimeter. Nature reserves are also located around the edge of the city and linked via the woodlands to man-made ecosystems which penetrate into the urban fabric and encourage wildlife. It is a design scheme about how multi-sensory experiences can be merged with landscape architecture in order to integrate humans into spatial landscape elements creating meaningful places, and producing distinctive memorable designs which harbor extraordinary experiences that promote happiness. By artfully exploring and applying multi-sensory experiences as a key design tool to the field of landscape architecture, designers can integrate the mind, body, and soul into the senses to create optimal experiences. The designed peripatetic pathways and platforms are simple in architectural synthesis since it was limited in the use of simple geometric forms

of small dimensions: square surfaces 4.00 x 4.00m and orthogonal surfaces 4.00x8.00m in a stark contrast with the complexity that characterizes the city fabric.

The proposed illusionary designed natural place for relaxation is close to a contemporary dense city where human beings may dwell and explore its natural ecosystems of fauna and flora. It represents a series of gardens-platforms and large blocks of woodland close to the water edge which achieve similar dislocations of space and incitements to the imagination. It is a peripatetic garden that shares its place between the movement through the natural ecosystem and the archipelago. It is a fictional place of happiness made out of enclosures and openings, views towards the sea and the natural ecosystem, large blocks of woodland, a garden path between the visual and the tactile. Water adds a touch of magic to the scenery.



Curving pathway through the natural ecosystem of the proposed woodlands leads to the designed platforms

It reflects the many moods and colors of the sky, and its surface is patterned and textured by the multiple landscape elements and forms. The proposed large blocks of woodland bring immense value to the overall scheme, including from environmental benefits and physical health to the more subtle components of well being like stress levels and happiness. Urban woodlands may contribute to the kinds of vibrant spaces that people want to inhabit and the kinds of cities that residents can't help but feel connected to once landscape architects admit and celebrate their role in creating vibrant urban environments.

The series of gardens-platforms and large blocks of woodland become as a result of body/space, feeling and felt, viewed beyond the ordinary "ways of seeing" landscape and touched, addressing the walking experience, a poetic matrix of a living zone of vegetation, wood and stone, a utopian project that may be a lesson for the contemporary practitioner of landscape design. Colors and textures create a bubble of happiness, a tribute to science and wonder, an earthly paradise where visitors will be able to loosen the grip of the ordinary, regain faith in the human species and its capabilities and rediscover the mythic ways to connect with nature and ultimately our own human souls. Such attributes ultimately lead to oneiric qualities capable to generate enchantment, magic and wonders. Paraphrasing Oscar Niemeyer statements about the meaning of architecture, we can argue that landscape architecture is about surprise and the creation of sensational places that offer the gift of happiness to all human beings (Neimeyer, 2000). Landscape Architecture is about reflecting on man's existence on earth through gentle inventions on the land that offer to ordinary people the emotion of newness, a sense of delight and pleasure, a borderland between reality and fantasy to escape the trappings of the modern world and reconnect humanity with nature. This is what landscape architects can do, nothing more.

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