

THE NEW

LANDSCAPE DECLARATION

A CALL TO ACTION FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Chapter 1

OUR TIME?

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In the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, you can find the diaries of Ian McHarg. Penciled in for the day of June 2, 1966, McHarg had only one thing to do: meet with his contemporaries who had been assembled by the Landscape Architecture Foundation (LAF)—Grady Clay, Charles Hammond, Campbell Miller, George Patton, and John Simonds. Legend has it that the meeting took place at Independence Hall in Philadelphia where they drafted and read out a 490-word *Declaration of Concern*. They decried pollution, stressed that “man is not free of nature’s demands,” and hailed landscape architecture as “a key to solving the environmental crisis.” They insisted that because of their basis in the natural sciences, landscape architects can interpret the landscape “correctly,” and that therefore they are “qualified to plan and design the environment.”

No one knows who really wrote the declaration or what the process was leading up to its publication, but the declaration’s emphasis on understanding the landscape through its biophysical layers, not to mention its tone of bravado, would suggest that it was McHarg who held the pen.

The substance of the declaration was hardly earth-shattering, and there is no evidence that it attracted any media attention, but it did come at a significant moment in time. The year 1966 was bracketed by two hugely symbolic events. The first, in 1965, was the death of McHarg’s alter ego—the charismatic champion of utopian modernism, Le Corbusier. The second, in 1967, was NASA’s public release of the first whole Earth image. From here on, humanity would begin to comprehend its planetary ecological limits. Simultaneously, guided by Jane Jacobs, the design and planning professions

began their paradigmatic shift to a concern for real people in real places. Then, three years after the seeds of the declaration had been sown, McHarg's magnum opus, *Design with Nature*, emerged fully formed, and it remains one of landscape architecture's most important books to this day.

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In *Design with Nature*, with the entire planet as his stage and a dark city as his backdrop, McHarg repeatedly refers to landscape architects as stewards of the biosphere. It is here, with such grandiose pronouncements, that the global profession of landscape architecture would find both its (post) modern *raison d'être* and the impossibility of its realization. And it is this contradictory condition, in equal measure humbling and hubristic, that resonates through the profession and its academies to this day. It is what makes landscape architecture so compelling and, in a world so thoroughly changed by human hands, so pertinent.

The *1966 Declaration of Concern* had its limits. It was authored by five white men and focused on North America with no mention of equity, extinction, or climate change. As the fiftieth anniversary of the inception of the Landscape Architecture Foundation approached, it became obvious to the LAF leadership that the *1966 Declaration of Concern* required

renewal. This gave rise to a gathering, The New Landscape Declaration: A Summit on Landscape Architecture and the Future, held at the University of Pennsylvania on June 10 and 11, 2016. The summit provided the platform for a representative sample of selected landscape architecture academics and

professionals to make new declarations and engage in debate with over 600 attendees. The 32 declarations presented at the summit are now gathered in this commemorative

volume and served as the raw material from which the final wording of the *New Landscape Declaration* was hewn. These documents, alongside the new declaration, provide us with a historical opportunity to survey the profession's state of mind and speculate on its future. To that end, as I read them, three big topics emerged around which the 32 declarations orbit: climate change, urbanization, and the profession's identity in the twenty-first century.

Climate change

As a paleontological and contemporary phenomenon, climate change was known in the 1960s when the *1966 Declaration of Concern* was drafted but did not gain popular currency until two significant events: in 1979 when a National Academy of Sciences committee forecast temperature rise, and in 1988 when the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change (IPCC) was formed. Rather than reading its absence from the 1966 declaration as shortsightedness, the original declaration’s essential message—that human systems should be tuned to the earth’s systems—is one that climate change makes more prescient, not less.

It is no mistake then that an overwhelming majority of the 32 new declarations refer to climate change and its symptoms as matters of priority. But apart from just using the expression to galvanize the profession, we need to ask what climate change really means for landscape architecture. Naomi Klein provides a big clue when she writes: “...climate change changes everything.”

The climate has always been changing, so, technically speaking, climate change is nothing new, but anthropogenic climate change is different. We have now irrevocably altered natural history on a planetary scale, and while we have always made an impact, we have never before altered the fundamental workings of the earth system as a whole. Once you actually understand what this means, it is shocking. This is our Copernican revolution. What nature is or is not, and what it means to be human, are profoundly destabilized. In this sense, climate change is another name for, and evidence of, the arrival of the Anthropocene: an epoch in which cultural and natural histories have collapsed into one another and their fates rendered mutual. If anything beneficial is to come from our pumping billions of tons of carbon into

the earth system, it is that its empirical existence ends the long history of mistaking nature as a mere resource we can exploit without consequence or venerating nature as something inviolable.

Nature in the era of climate change and the Anthropocene is then quite different from the *nature* invoked by the 1966 *Declaration of Concern*. That 1960s nature was still a pure thing “out there,” something being polluted, something to be saved, and for McHarg, a template we ought to study with scientific accuracy and then “correctly” follow. To design with the nature of the Anthropocene is, however, not so simple. Not only is nature now wildly unpredictable, it is also widely recognized as a cultural construct. This represents a shift away from the supposed harmony of sustainability that has dominated environmentalism for the latter half of the twentieth century, to the mutability of resilience.

Nature in the Anthropocene, the nature manifested by climate change, is not yet well known, but one thing is certain—it is now what we make it. And what we make it follows on directly from how we conceptualize it.

As was declared at the summit: Engineers led the nineteenth century, architects the twentieth, and this is now our time.

And this is precisely what landscape architects do: whether we are aware of it or not, we give form to certain conceptualizations of nature. Our projects are, as it were, little worlds—experiments and case studies in synthesizing nature

and culture in evermore ingenious and complex ways. Thus, we find ourselves in a historically and culturally significant position. Indeed, as was declared at the summit: Engineers led the nineteenth century, architects the twentieth, and this is now our time.

But just saying it is our time does not make it so, and if there is one thing that almost all the new declarations glossed

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over, it is that landscape architecture still lacks the self-critical philosophical underpinnings that are needed to restrain its messianic tendencies and make more credible its claims to large-scale land use planning and urban design, let alone planetary stewardship. Maybe landscape architecture is not yet big enough for criticism and we must band together to build the profession, but as other professions and disciplines have demonstrated, it is ultimately criticality, not backslapping, that forges a profession that the public looks up to.

Urbanization

In tandem with changing the chemical composition of the atmosphere, over the last 50 years humanity has also altered the surface of the planet with urbanization and its related

infrastructure as never before. This historical phenomenon seems likely to continue for much, if not all, of the twenty-first century as world population moves into double-digit billions. If birthrates and migration from rural to urban areas continue to increase as demographers expect them to, then we can reasonably assume that an additional three billion people will become urbanized between now and 2100. The equivalent

of over 350 New York Cities will be needed to accommodate them—a little over 4.2 constructed each year.

Around the world, urban growth is occurring as both informal and planned

development and pushing in two directions—centrifugal sprawl on the one hand and centripetal densification on the other. As many of the declarations attest, landscape architects have leading roles to play in these processes. In the case of peri-urban growth, getting involved upstream of the development process would give landscape architects the opportunity to direct the growth, interweaving it with agricultural lands and remnant habitat. In the case of increasing density, designing high-performance public space—an art landscape architects have mastered over the past 50 years—will be critical to any city’s future economic, social, and ecological quality of life.

Whereas McHarg, quoting architect Peter Blake, referred to the modern city as “God’s own junkyard,” over the course of the last 50 years—as the tendrils of urbanization have become ubiquitous—design and planning professions have come to see

the city not as the problem but as a crucial part of the solution. While it may sound like spin, it is more than that. The city is a clustering of commerce, culture, architecture, and technology that has not changed much in 10,000 years but is now being fundamentally reconceptualized as something that could be continuous with, instead of just blithely resistant to, ecological flows. This reconceptualization opens the way for the practical and innovative redesign of urban systems *and* the global supply chains they depend upon.

Converting cities from industrial machines to ecological systems is no simple thing, but as ecologists, engineers, architects, planners, and developers—along with the general public—begin to think of cities as a new kind of nature rather than something opposed to nature, landscape architects find themselves at a propitious moment in time. Our propensity for holistic thinking and interdisciplinary collaboration, and our grasp of the systemic, relational, and temporal nature of things, along with the increasing sophistication of available data, mean landscape architects are well situated to participate in, if not lead, this urban transformation. Not only will cities become increasingly sophisticated ecological systems, but so too can we speculate that sometime in the twenty-second century, when world population numbers decline, agricultural production and food distribution will be more efficient and large-scale landscape restoration will be undertaken.

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At least that is the theory, and the hope. We must first get through this century's bottlenecks with some semblance of the ecosystem intact. This challenge is mired in spiritual, political, and economic orthodoxies that resist change, but it is also a design challenge. And, as many of the declarations stress, the profession of landscape architecture not only

feels a sense of responsibility, it also has the ability to make a constructive difference in parts of the world where the pressures of climate change and resource depletion are being felt with particular acuity.

Professional identity

The problem for the profession, however, is that these pressures are shaping territory where landscape architecture has very little capacity. As we move out from the wealthy enclaves of the developed world and follow their supply chains to the frontiers of extinction, extraction, and waste, landscape architecture's influence diminishes every step of the way. Taking this opportunity to reflect on the profession's identity and scope, we must stare into the chasm between the many things landscape architects *say* they could do and what they *actually* do.

To take the large-scale landscape issues of the Anthropocene seriously suggests a need for the significant expansion of landscape architecture's professional and educational capacity, something the *1966 Declaration of Concern* called for 50 years ago. This suggests the need for the profession's representative bodies, along with its educational programs and its practices, to ask themselves some questions: How can landscape architecture build capacity around the world rather than just export commercial services? How can work be created rather than just received? What knowledge is needed? What methods are most suitable? Whose interests will the results really serve?

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As I write this, I am keenly aware that institutions, schools, and practices can hardly countenance expansion when they are struggling just to hold their ground, but if the profession is to close the gap between what it says and what it does, then individuals and organizations need to be more ambitious and more adventurous. It also means that landscape architecture has to be better at communicating its global potential. But this cannot just be grandiloquence: it must be built on research and design projects of substance.

Many of the declarations champion the potential of new modes of practice and new constituencies, right here in the heart of the developed world. Our cities are riven by issues of social and ecological justice, which landscape architects can either disguise or confront in their work. For example, the agency of public space in retrofitting shrinking cities and the emergence of so-called *nature-based* strategies for coastal resilience have recently opened up challenging and rewarding roles for the landscape architect as the curator of sociopolitical and ecological processes as much as the provider of amenities.

In reading the declarations, there can be no mistake that the twenty-first-century landscape architectural project is one

of social justice, ecological synthesis, and territorial reach, but some declarations remind us that good design manifests civility and that, at its best, the language of landscape is poetic. One of the panel discussions

at the summit was devoted to questions of aesthetics, and in all the talk of problems and solutions, its message that design is akin to art rang clear. Indeed, for a field that claims the extraordinary history of gardens as its artistic legacy—not to mention aspects of modernism, earth art, and contemporary digital imaging—there is surprisingly little discussion or criticism of what contemporary landscape aesthetics are and what they might yet become.

The relative absence of discussions of aesthetics is in part landscape's great conceit: because it often looks benign, familiar, or 'natural,' no one thinks it is saying anything. The authors of contemporary landscapes need to worry about this issue. Irrespective of whether the images are true or false, or somewhere in-between, imagining its landscape is one of the primary ways that culture makes sense of its time and place in history and by which it creates and contests hegemonic meaning. As elemental as it is, the ecological crisis is also a crisis of meaning. Simply put, nature in the Anthropocene cannot look like the nature of the Holocene.

We can now ask how this new landscape declaration can help our small, relatively powerless, and yet critically important, profession make its "vital contribution." In essence, the *New Landscape Declaration* calls upon students, practitioners, and academics to work to diversify and expand the profession through "inclusive leadership, advocacy, and activism." It asks us to reflect on how we can reach toward the ideals of "equity, sustainability, resiliency, and democracy." It asks how we can help "create places that serve the higher purpose of social and ecological justice for all peoples and all species." It asks how our designs "nourish our deepest needs for communion with the natural world and with one another." It asks how they "serve the health and well-being of all communities."

Ideals are beacons, not ends. In this way, the *New Landscape Declaration* is not only about the profession as an anonymous whole, it is also a call for personal reflection.

We are asking a lot of our profession. Indeed, most of us fall well short of meeting those ideals. But that is surely the point: ideals are beacons, not ends. In this way, the *New Landscape Declaration* is not only about the profession as an anonymous whole, it is also a call for personal reflection on what it means to be a landscape architect at this moment in history and that might be where its words take real effect. It is from there that inspired and authentic action can emerge and gather momentum.

By what they say, and in part by what they do not say, the 32 declarations collected here are good to think with. They speak to an uncertain new world of climate change and global urbanization but do so with clear-eyed confidence in the profession's values, abilities, and potential. Each declaration has some wisdom that will help you form your own answers to the challenges the new declaration presents. This is not a time to be cynical: let the *New Landscape Declaration* be our Hippocratic oath.