

The Ethical Boundaries of Humanity's Land Use

There is a constant balance between the needs of society and the desire to preserve land against expansion and alteration. To be able to understand the role of aesthetics in the modern conversation of land use, we must first define the extent to which humans are allowed to alter the landscape.

It is a fact of society that humans alter landscapes. Some thinkers such as John Muir believed in the “untouched”. (Muir, 2008, p. 37) While others may say that human use of the landscape is unbounded. Some advocate a middle ground, with the right to use resources, but the responsibility of stewardship.

Much of the modern debate on land use centers around the preservation of tangible resources needed for survival. In the 1987 Brundtland Commission, the United Nations established that the broad definition of sustainability is “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (“Sustainability”, n.d.) Put in the context of the landscape profession, “The American Society of Landscape Architects believes environmental sustainability is the stable coexistence of natural and built ecosystems and human activity, and that environmental sustainability is a necessary component of the long-term viability of society’s health, safety, and welfare.” (“Environmental sustainability”, n.d.) These definitions leave scope for a variety of interpretations, yet establish a general framework for land development moving forward.

To define our own personal philosophies in the aim of the landscapes we create as designers, our larger worldviews are employed. From a historical perspective societies throughout the world have held common and differing views on this subject.

The ancient Greek perspective on land use is well defined in the following quotation from a 2023 journal article: “Seneca the Younger, a Stoic philosopher, emphasized the interdependence between humans and nature. He advocated for living in harmony with the natural world and cautioned against excessive exploitation of resources...Cicero...believed in the importance of responsible stewardship and argued for the equitable distribution of resources. ... Pliny the Elder, a naturalist and author, demonstrated a deep appreciation for the wonders of the natural world... Lucretius, a

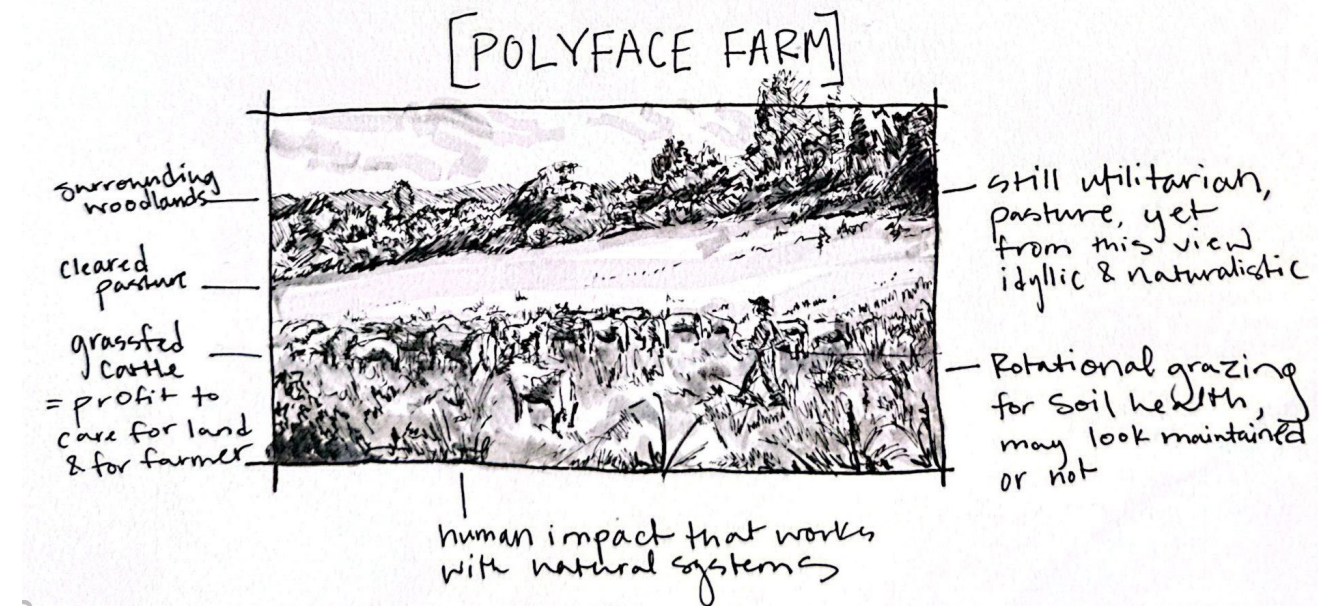
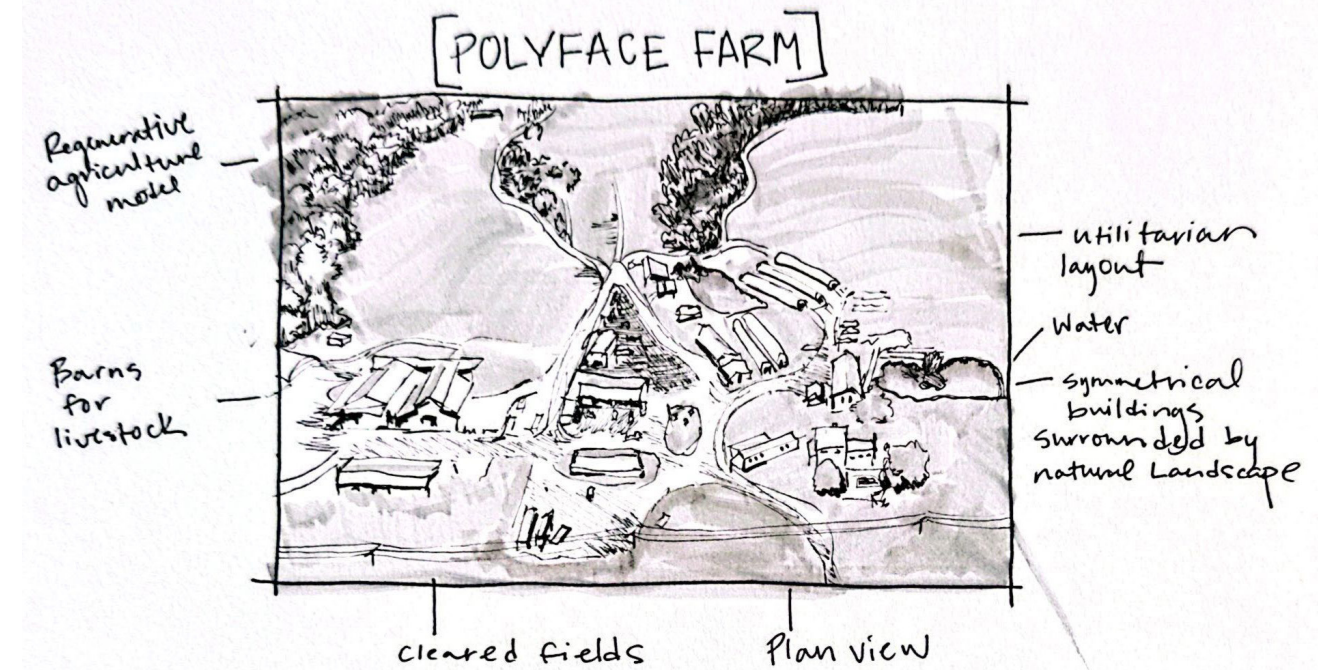
Roman poet and philosopher, explored the relationship between humans, nature, and the pursuit of happiness. In his seminal work “De Rerum Natura” (On the Nature of Things), Lucretius emphasized the interconnectedness of all things and advocated for a balanced and moderate approach to human actions.” (Lee, 2023, p. 2) We can see many foundational philosophies in environmental ethics present in the ideas of these ancient thinkers.

Ancient Chinese agriculture was greatly formed by the philosophy of San Cai; “The San Cai theory, elaborated in the Zhou Yi..., posits that heaven, earth, and humanity are the three fundamental components of the universe, ... This concept of harmony between human activity, natural conditions, and crops provided essential guidance for diverse agricultural environments across China.” (Ouyang & Shang, 2025, p. 2) The worldview in ancient Chinese culture factors in humanity as a key part of the natural world. It is recognized in the concept of San Cai that the relationship between people and nature is one of balance. Human needs from the land are not ignored, crops are cultivated in such a way that gives acknowledgement to maintaining balance. This idea of working within the pre-existing conditions of nature would be similarly found centuries later in the work of renowned landscape architect, Ian McHarg, in his book, *Design with Nature*. (McHarg, 1992)

In her book, *The Serviceberry*, botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, defines ecosystem services as simply gifts. (Kimmerer, 2024, p. 8) The author states, “Many Indigenous Peoples, including my Anishinaabe relatives and my Haudenosaunee neighbors, inherit what is known as ‘a culture of gratitude,’ where lifeways are organized around recognition and responsibility for earthly gifts” and that “If our first response to the receipt of gifts is gratitude, then our second is reciprocity: to give a gift in return.” (Kimmerer, 2024, p. 11) The worldview Kimmerer describes places its emphasis on human dependency on nature. Only out of an acknowledgement of dependency can a full expression of gratitude be given. It is up to humanity to determine if the human relationship to the environment is simply resource mining or reciprocity. Kimmerer gives specific examples of what reciprocity may look like, and many of these actions can be placed under the language of “Stewardship.”



Polyface Farms. *Polyface Farm Checking Cows* [Photograph]. <https://polyfacefarms.com/blog/checking-cows>



Untouched Sublime, or Developed Landscapes

There are many schools of thought on how humans relate to their environment. Past recognising the utilitarian relationship people have with landscape, whether that be agricultural or the utility of natural resources; humans have an emotional relationship with their surroundings. Our emotional feelings about a place so often affects our logical responses. A person may pose stronger opposition to wind mills being placed at the foot of the Rocky Mountains in Boulder Colorado, than they do in a small city on the plains of Kansas. What is the difference between these landscapes? Why do the citizens of one place relate to the landscape differently than the citizens of another? Part of it may be utilitarian. Windmills are not the only way of producing power, and there may be ways that leave less of a visual impact on the landscape that may be preferred. If we accept the presupposition that windmills are not inherently attractive, we can further see how the incentive for installing wind farms may be financial. They provide an opportunity for a farmer to earn additional income from their land.

Even so, if the utilitarian reasons for constructing windmills in one place over another, are the main part of the picture, there is likely a fraction left for the influence of emotion in this decision. Utility may win out in having the power of influencing decisions, but that does not exclude emotions from being present as well.

Emotional perspectives often win out over logical perspectives. For example, when national parks were created that came at a financial cost to the government. The land had to be bought, and a workforce had to be assembled to maintain these areas now under the care of the government. Not strictly logical. To the government land being used to cultivate crops, generating commodities is more profitable than land being maintained for the purpose of recreation. However, few people would contest that there are some landscapes so beautiful that they deserve to be cared for, preserved with limited infrastructure, and not to be used for their resources. Where does this hierarchy come from?

Some may say that preservation is a luxury of a modern age. Whether a landscape is preserved or not is likely dependent on social factors of the era, and the extent of inhabitation as time progresses. Societies of Europe did not have the luxury of not using resources. In the British Isles they

could not leave their forests standing as they had been for centuries. With an increasing population the lumber was needed for industry and shelter, and the land was needed for feeding that population. This may be, but it does not cancel out that there was a desire to preserve in the first place. Beauty exists as a value in humanity, and as such it should be cultivated. Not necessarily at the expense of the more utilitarian needs of humanity's land use, but in addition. There are many cases in which it may not be necessary to develop land, or it may be developed in such a way to minimize the built environment's impact on open spaces. An "untouched" landscape should not be the goal, because rarely has that actually existed in human occupied regions, instead conservation and using land in a responsible manner should be prioritized.



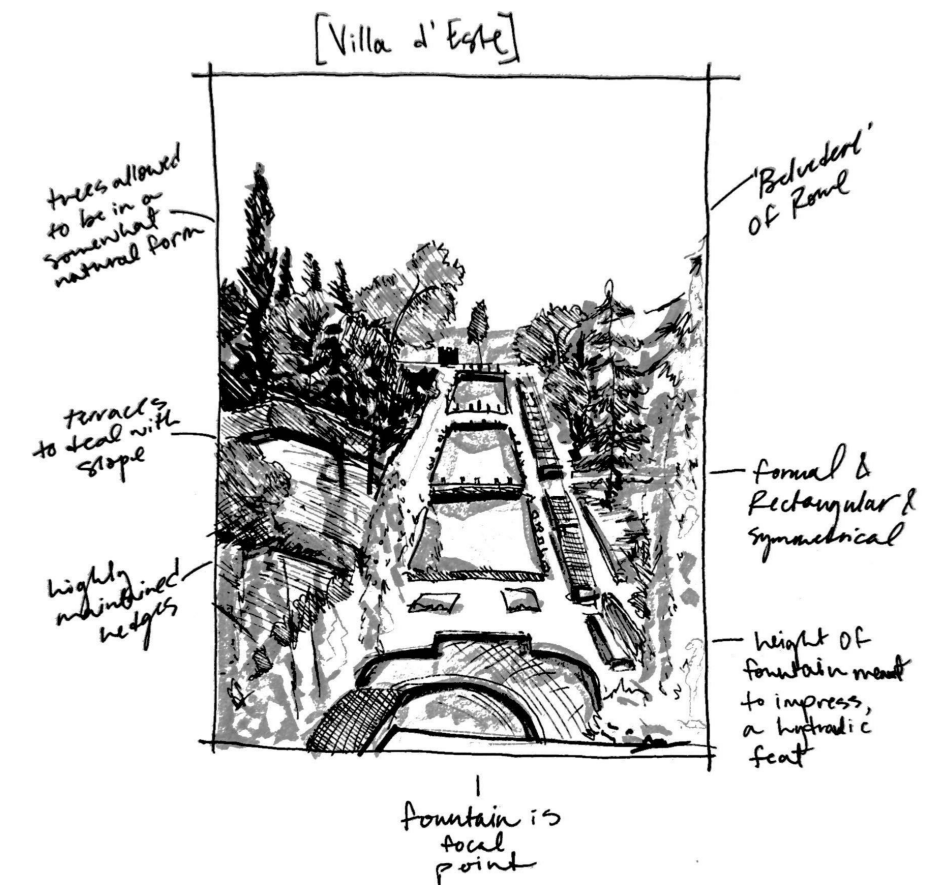
Newman, D. *Yosemite* [Photograph]. <https://wildlandtrekking.com/blog/the-ultimate-guide-to-yosemite-national-park/>

The Value of Aesthetics

Do Aesthetics matter? It is plain to see that every person is influenced by beauty. Americans spend their summers visiting national parks or seeing historic cities abroad. So how much do aesthetics impact a society? Andrew Jackson Downing was one of the first American landscape designers. He believed that the external environment had a tangible effect on the health of society. He wrote many books on this matter, but in his book *The Architecture of Country Houses*... he says, “a good house is a powerful means of civilization...the perception of proportion, symmetry, order, and beauty, awakens the desire for possession, and with them comes...refinement of manners.” (Downing, 1851, p. 10) He further states that, “there is a moral influence in a country home—when, among an educated, truthful, and refined people, it is an echo of their character—which is more powerful than any mere oral teachings of virtue and morality.” (Downing, 1851, pp. 10-11) It should be prefaced before analysing Downing’s statements further, that he is not approaching the concept of having pride in one’s home from the traditional view commonly held in the past by the European Aristocracy. Their pride was in displaying wealth, while it seems A.J. Downing’s idea of pride is the delight in cultivating goodness, in such a way that it transforms from an internal state to something external; and that when something is externalized it has within it more permanence. The permanence of beauty is what art museums and tourism of historic cities is built on. When Downing advocates for better design it is not some sort of fixed architectural pinnacle he is setting as the standard for country homes. Rather, he intends his writing to carry ideals that are adaptable to an individual’s means. Cultivating goodness exists within the circumstances of one’s life. A wealthy land owner, and farmer of humbler means are both meant to be able to cultivate beauty when building their own individual homes.



Condruz, M. F. (2022) A group of people walking around a water fountain [Photograph]. https://unsplash.com/photos/a-group-of-people-walking-around-a-water-fountain-gk4ilvg_Z4M



Is Beauty Subjective

We can agree that beauty has a profound impact on the human soul. The question then remains, what is beautiful. For every person there is a unique answer, yet many people's ideals of beauty overlap. Does it follow a rational framework of symmetry similar to the architectural principles Alberti established? Or is beauty utterly subjective, which accounts for the differences in taste people exhibit?

Brent Hull, a master builder, who specializes in historic and traditional construction outlines what he believes makes historic architecture so beautiful: the classical concept of "Beauty in the Human Scale." (Hull, n.d.) He says, "The Greeks and Romans used the human body as the proportioning system for their buildings... The male body inspired the Doric order, the female body the Ionic order, and the young maiden's body the Corinthian order." (Hull, n.d.) Ratios were used to make every detail of construction fit proportionally within its order. (Hull, n.d.) The concept of using ratios was not an arbitrary set of architectural rules, as "For our study, and to the Greeks, this golden mean is found all over nature, in the growth of a pine cone, in the face of a sunflower, in the nautilus shell and of course the human body." (Hull, n.d.) Right angles are rarely seen in nature but symmetry is not absent. Symmetry is not always a measure of a horizontal or vertical reflection, but more a proportioning in regard to a whole. Hull summarizes the Greek school of thought by saying, "Beauty for them was order, balance and harmony." (Hull, n.d.) It is easy to see this concept in the context of architecture. Gothic buildings such as the Milan Cathedral exhibit symmetry to the scale of immense detail. In Islamic architecture symmetry is important, as can be seen in the architecture of the Taj Mahal. Symmetry also plays a role in the Buddhist architecture of Japan, as seen in Sensoji temple in Tokyo. Balance is integral to architectural styles across the world. It would be hard to say however that beautiful design exists purely within the confines of symmetry.

Nature seems to be symmetry ordered unsymmetrically. A tree may be the epitome of symmetry in the shape of its canopy, but it grows haphazardly spaced from other trees in a forest. Yet in this "disorder" there is order. If the feeling symmetry gives us is one of balance, then if balance can be arrived at outside of a physically symmetrical form- the harmony emphasized in the Greek philoso-

phy may be created.

The Japanese traditional style of floral arranging, Ikebana, emphasizes an asymmetrical form. (Moriyama & Moriyama, 1999, p. 356) The asymmetrical arrangement of plant material reflects the Shinto understanding of nature. (Moriyama & Moriyama, 1999, p. 356) There is no hierarchy of gods, rather the "kami", deities, exist fluidly throughout nature. (Moriyama & Moriyama, 1999, p. 356) Western floral arrangement takes a symmetrical and centered approach, which expresses the Christian belief of a universe centered around one god. (Moriyama & Moriyama, 1999, p. 358) Contemplating floral design styles as aesthetic reflections of cultural and religious beliefs, provides an interesting perspective on how the holistic aesthetic tastes of a country develop. The information on the evolution of floral styles seems to suggest that the symmetry of Western architecture mentioned, was in no small part influenced by religion. Churches in Rome reflect the centrality of God in the universe; and in the case of ancient Greek mythology they have many gods, yet they are arranged in a hierarchy. This differs enough from the Shinto structure of deities to cause a difference in perspective on the ordering of the universe. Yet there are exceptions to this reasoning. Shinto shrines display striking symmetry. They stand amongst forests in bold vertical forms. Two of the holiest sites in Christianity, The Church of the Nativity and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre are not strictly symmetrical. One would think that if symmetry was the epitome of architecture, at these sites it would be present and emphasized in the form. Likewise, if symmetry was a completely dishonest representation of the natural world, would structures so symmetrical be permitted to break up the natural world?

Symmetry and asymmetry are both present in the natural world. Frequently the wild environment is demonstrated to be asymmetrical. Mountains do not follow patterns, streams do not flow in straight lines, and perennials do not spread in orderly drifts. Yet, amongst these mountains walk wolves hunting elk; two pairs of legs front and back, chasing the same, using one set of eyes, looking in another set. Looking at this arrangement, it seems that the world is a "disordered" stage, on which orderly created beings live. There is orderliness in the unordered but continuous state of nature. There is disorder in the actions of beings that appear to be created according to an orderly manner. This makes it understandable to see design as a dynamic dance between two states of order -that are both of equal merit. In designing a garden with formal rationality we may play to the desire of creating balance in an unbalanced world. In gazing upon wind swept hills, we are reminded human order of a symmetrical form is not the form of all types of order. The exceptions to rationality and predictability we encounter in our lives are not contradictory to what should be, instead they are validated by the inanimate natural world's form of orderliness- its continuity of disarray. If orderliness equates to predictability, and therefore safety in the human mind, then places with a definable order are the places the human mind feels most comfortable. The aesthetic order found in rational proportions provides comfort through balance, structure, and a mimicking of human and animal form. The great persistent order of disorder amongst animals brings in itself an unpredictable predictability. The disorder of nature is created by trees and plants lack of directly instinctual behavior, their mere reactionary actions toward changing seasons and natural events. They act in a passive manner toward their external surroundings. Seed will disperse from a wildflower if there is wind to carry it. Animals have instincts. They too respond to the external world, but in a set framework of instincts. The contrast of passivity and assertion. Despite common connotations of these words, neither are to be viewed as positive or negative. They are simply modes of interacting with the world. Humans feel safe in environments of predictability, yet are cognisant of the wider world's unpredictability. It seems that humans like de-

signed landscapes because they offer some framework of predictability, yet acknowledge moments of unpredictable wildness.

In his work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke proposes his idea of Beauty. He believes beauty primarily exists within the senses, stating “It is not by the force of long attention and enquiry that we find any object to be beautiful; beauty demands no assistance from our reasoning; even the will is unconcerned; the appearance of beauty as effectually causes some degree of love in us, as the application of ice or fire produces the ideas of heat or cold.” (Burke, 2008, p. 92) To Burke proportion exists outside of the senses, and that it is merely, “a creature of the understanding”. (Burke, 2008, p. 92) He seems to suggest that beauty cannot ultimately come from proportion, it is the qualities of the object outside of proportion that complete its ability to be beautiful.

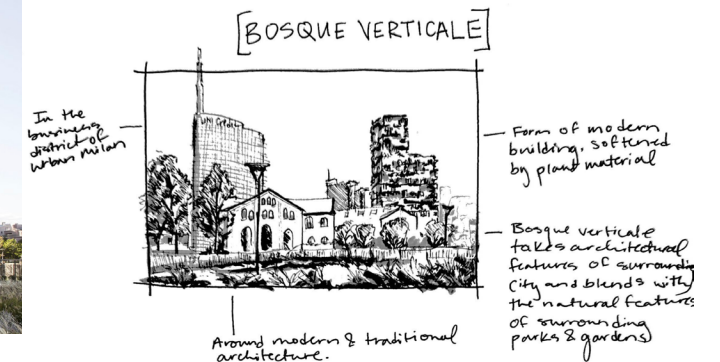
He defines these qualities to be smallness, smoothness, gradual variation, delicacy, and color. (Burke, 2008, pp. 112-116) The basis he gives for selecting these qualities, is that they are “properties that operate by nature, and are less liable to be altered by caprice, or confounded by a diversity of tastes, than any others.” (Burke, 2008, p. 117) It is interesting to find the qualities of beauty so specifically described. Some of his justifications for the ideals of these qualities are matters of personal taste and cultural bias. A clear example would be found in the color palette he describes as being the most pleasing, saying, “Those which seem most appropriated to beauty, are the milder of every sort; light greens; soft blues; weak whites; pink reds; and violets.” (Burke, 2008, p. 116) This parallels the dominant color palette of the Rococo art movement that was occurring at the time. (“Rococo”, 2025) Yet, there is value in considering the specifics of beauty. Specifics of beauty may in some instances exist without falling into the vagueness of personal taste. An example Burke uses in the text is that large hardwoods such as oaks are not considered beautiful in the same way more delicate plants are; he says, “they are aw[e]ful and majestic; they inspire a sort of reverence.” (Burke, 2008, p. 115) Many today would not endorse the idea, nor perhaps even many at the time of Burke’s writing the statement. Trees have long been viewed as beautiful by many, from poets to laymen. But what is interesting is that Burke makes a distinction between beauty and awe. This is because he differentiates between beauty and the sublime.

The sublime as Burke defines it is, “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” (Burke, 2008, p. 39) Beauty is positive, the sublime is negative, yet according to Burke both exist as feelings outside of logic. He proposes that negative and positive feelings are not “dependent on each other for their existence”, one is not the absence of another. (Burke, 2008, p. 32) This carries over into the idea that a landscape could potentially include both beauty and the sublime, and they could both affect man from his “state of indifference”. (Burke, 2008, p. 32) William Wordsworth further specifies the interaction of the two emotions. He says, “the same object may be both sublime and beautiful ... tho’...the mind cannot be affected by both these sensations at the same time, for they are not only different from, but opposite to, each other.” (Wordsworth, 1974, p. 1) For the landscape designer this may present a difference in the experiential quality of a garden. If the idea is for a landscape to make a distinct impression on its viewer, it should be acknowledged that the viewer will not comprehend the feeling of the garden all at once. Beauty and sublimity may wash over viewers at differing moments throughout the scene or garden. Likewise, if it is solely the feeling of beauty to be cultivated by a design, then careful thought must be given to the surrounding context. The context should give intention to blocking out objects of the sublime.

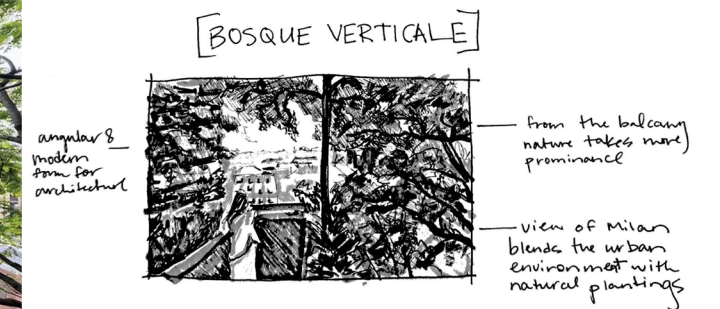
The balance of the sublimity and beauty may be seen as a subject of personal taste for the designer; or responsive to the needs of the client, the geographical context, and the intended viewers. It may also be inferred that the personal tastes regarding the balance of these two feelings may change day to day and throughout a person’s lifetime. This emphasizes the crucial point that there is no “ideal” balance. Landscapes of awe and landscapes of humble beauty are both important in the domain of landscape design.



Stefano Boeri Architetti. *Bosque Verticale 1*
[Photograph] <https://www.stefano-boeri-architetti.net/en/project/vertical-forest/>



Baan, I. *Bosque Verticale 2* [Photograph]. <https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/17525-celebrating-the-legacy-and-growth-of-milans-bosco-verticale>



Landscape Design's History in Painterly Origins

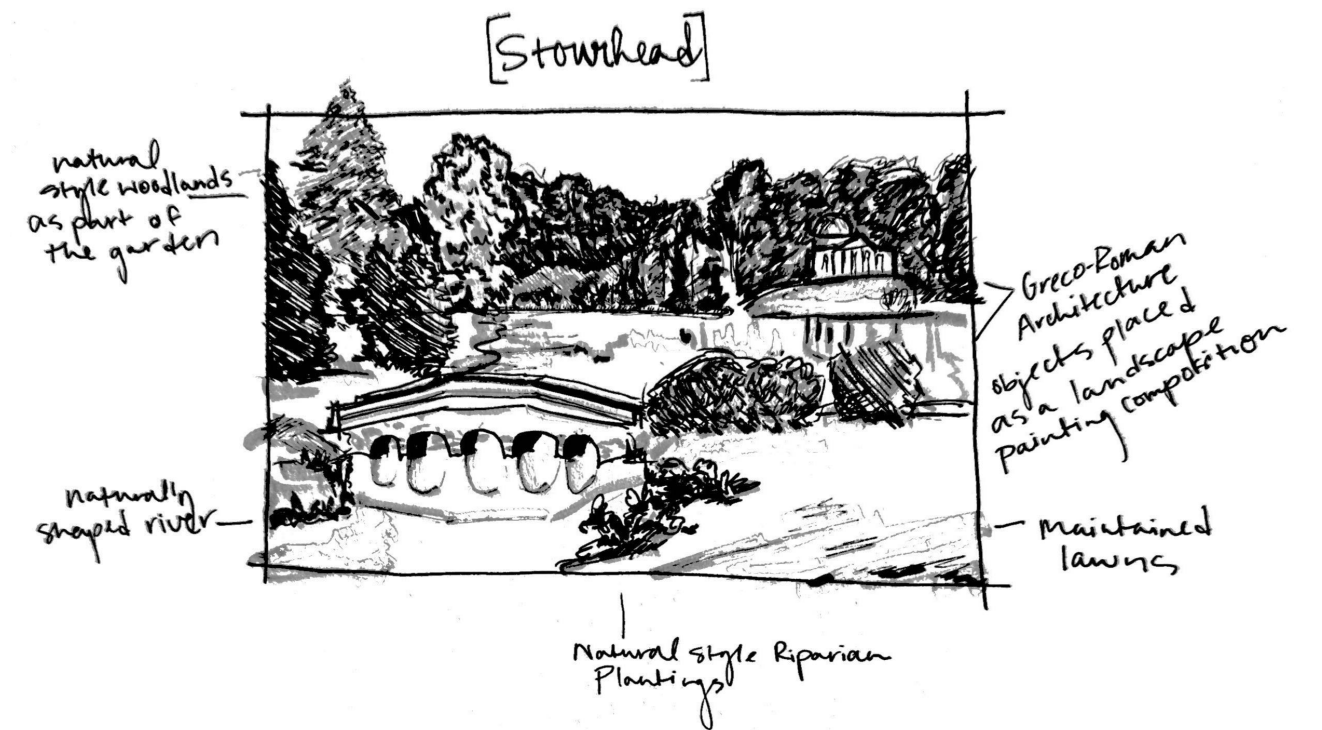
The conflict between symmetry and asymmetry was dealt with at the start of landscape painting becoming a subject. It was traditionally thought that landscape was not a worthy subject for painting, as depictions of religious and historic figures took precedence. Examining landscape design's painterly origins helps us understand the evolution of landscape design in its aesthetic sense, outside of the ecological or at times architectural framework emphasized today. If landscape design is viewed outside of a painterly context today, it is because of the distinct needs of today. It is objectively crucial to find solutions to the modern problems faced in post industrial and urban environments. However, it is beneficial to return to studying landscape design in the context of landscape painting, because it tells us key truths about humanity's interactions with nature.

It had traditionally been thought that landscape painting grew gradually out of giving landscape increasing prominence in the composition of paintings with human subjects. (Paden, 2015, p. 53) While this can be seen in some works, landscape painting did not quite arise out of happenstance, but out of an intentional divergence from traditional aesthetic composition. (Paden, 2015, p. 53) The classical ideals of balance and symmetry, discussed in a previous section, applied to the composition of all types of paintings; and it was in question of whether this could be applied to landscapes. (Paden, 2015, p. 52) Philosopher Roger Paden argues they did not keep with traditional aesthetic theory, saying, "instead of using framing to present landscapes as formally beautiful objects, picturesque landscape painters were developing a style in which landscapes would be read as complex narrative or relational fields involving dispersed objects (many of which might be beautiful) 'strewn about here and there,' with no overall order, that draw the viewer into a playful relationship with the landscape depicted." (Paden, 2015, p. 54) This "narrative" as Paden calls it, would be crucial in influencing the way landscapes were thought about. The experiential quality of landscapes was emphasized in a way it had not been previously, "we do not simply calmly contemplate the formal beauty of a landscape painting, but, in reading the painting, we are actively engaged in moving through the picturesque world it creates." (Paden, 2015, p. 57) If landscape painting was shifted from being understood as "arts-based" to being understood as "nature-based" then that same distinction could be looked for in

the world of landscape design. (Paden, 2015, p. 58) If there was a shift in the aesthetic understanding of what constitutes an ideal landscape there could certainly be evidence found to support the theory. Many significant pre-enlightenment gardens contain very formal lines. The Villa d'Este garden, just outside of Rome, has a strong linear and formally terraced structure. The fountains symmetrically line each terrace to provide a strong sense of order. This garden impresses not only through its hydraulic achievements, but equally through the classical landscape meant to contain the fountains that were so groundbreaking. If the goal of the garden was to display power, then surely the form chosen would be classical, as only classical could be viewed as the epitome of aesthetic perfection. This aesthetic perfection applied to all the arts, and therefore classical form could be synonymous with the term "arts-based." Yet a century later in England, when gardens were being constructed with the same intent of displaying power and wealth, they at times took very different forms. Capability Brown's landscapes provide an example of this change. In Brown's landscapes, "Simplicity was one aim; a seemingly natural appearance of native topography was another; and the blending of park and garden, ... was a third." (Symes, 2016, p. 16) The notion of landscape and gardens blending together within a design was a rather new concept. The Italian concept of *belvedere*, beautiful view, had existed previously, yet the natural landscape was considered quite separate from the borders of the garden, and not to be brought into the edges of a garden. (Symes, 2016, p. 9) The Enlightenment was in part responsible for this change in mindset toward the landscape. In the early era the view of nature as wholly good predominated, championed by the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury. (Symes, 2016, p. 10) However as the enlightenment progressed, this idea became unsupported. This was in part influenced by the devastating Lisbon Earthquake in 1755, which claimed up to thirty- thousand lives. (Symes, 2016, p. 10) According to garden historian Michael Symes, "The three dramatic ... results of the disaster were (1) to shake confidence in God as all-good (and to strengthen the theosceptical arm of the Enlightenment); (2) to destroy faith in nature as overall benevolent; and (3) to focus attention on the wild, ungovernable forces of nature." (Symes, 2016, p. 10) The Post-Enlightenment view of landscape, in relation to humanity, seems to have found a middle ground. The wilderness is no longer viewed as overwhelmingly dangerous, as it had previously. (Paden, 2015, p. 50) Yet, the concept of the natural world as all good and caring to human needs was no longer tenable, emphasized by the natural disasters that occurred. This set the perfect stage for the idea of the sublime.



Reis, F. *Stourhead* [Photograph]. <https://www.historyhit.com/guides/best-historical-gardens-in-england/>



A Transcendentalist Perspective

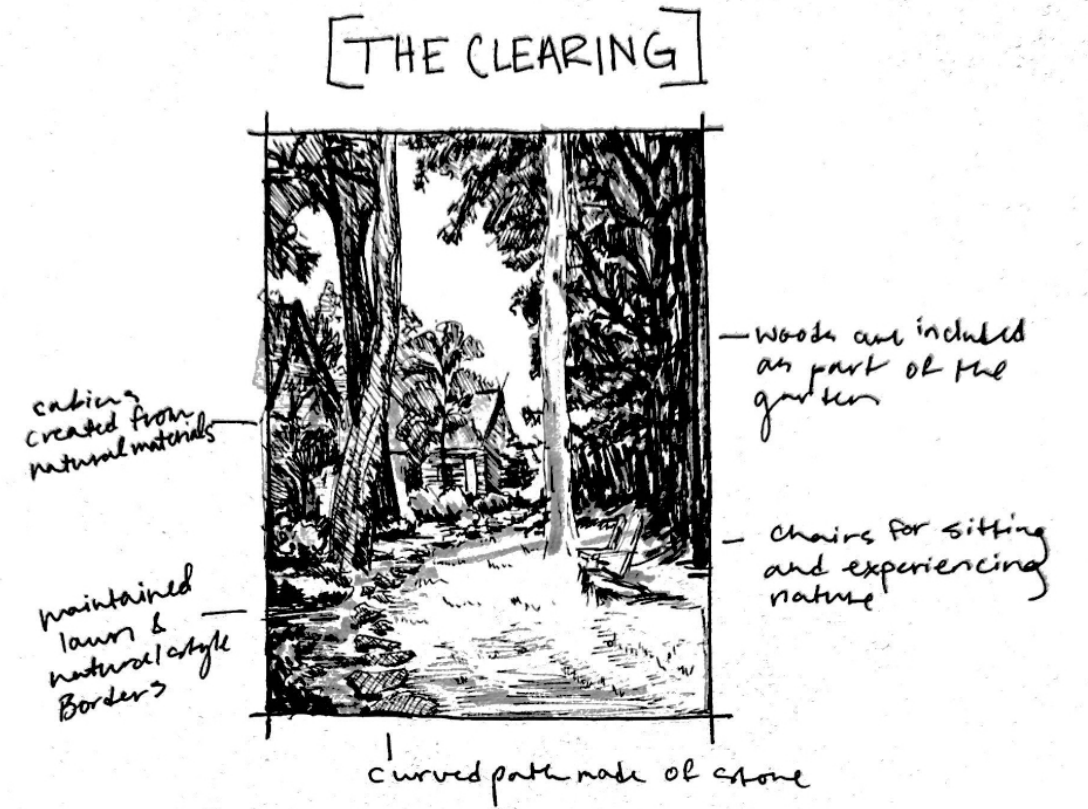
In the mid 18th century transcendentalist thought arrived in American Philosophy. The movement, popularized by thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau had a new perspective on the value of nature.

Ralph Waldo Emerson defended nature as having a spiritual quality. That man should have a uniquely personal experience of nature, fit within his ideal of self reliance. He says, “In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. (Emerson, 1940, p. 12) The material of nature encompasses God to Emerson. He says later, that when he stands in the woods, “all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the universal being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God... I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.” (Emerson, 1940, p. 13) To Emerson the natural world was the setting of truth, not necessarily the words of tradition. In *Nature*, he opens with the lines, “Our age is retrospective ... The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? (Emerson, 1940, p. 5) Transcendentalist thought seems to build upon the ideas of the earlier romanticism movement. If Post-Enlightenment Romantic thought meant to establish a personal relationship with nature through the sublime; then transcendentalism took that idea and established the belief that personal experience, found in nature, is the only real source of objective truth. While Emerson was speaking to his own personal revelations, he was also trying to establish what it means to be a self, an important question being asked throughout early American history. It is up for debate how many Americans truly adopted the transcendentalist perspective fully, but certainly the works of transcendental figures had significant literary impact. It should be noted that Emerson and Thoreau had slight departures in philosophy. According to philosopher Jason P. Matzke, “For Emerson, the human soul is a part of ultimate ‘Reason’ while the human body and the rest of the material world are (merely) manifestations of this ‘higher’ spiritual aspect of reality.” (Matzke, 2014, p. 174) But, for Thoreau, “the material world is much more substantial—both metaphysically and in terms of value”.

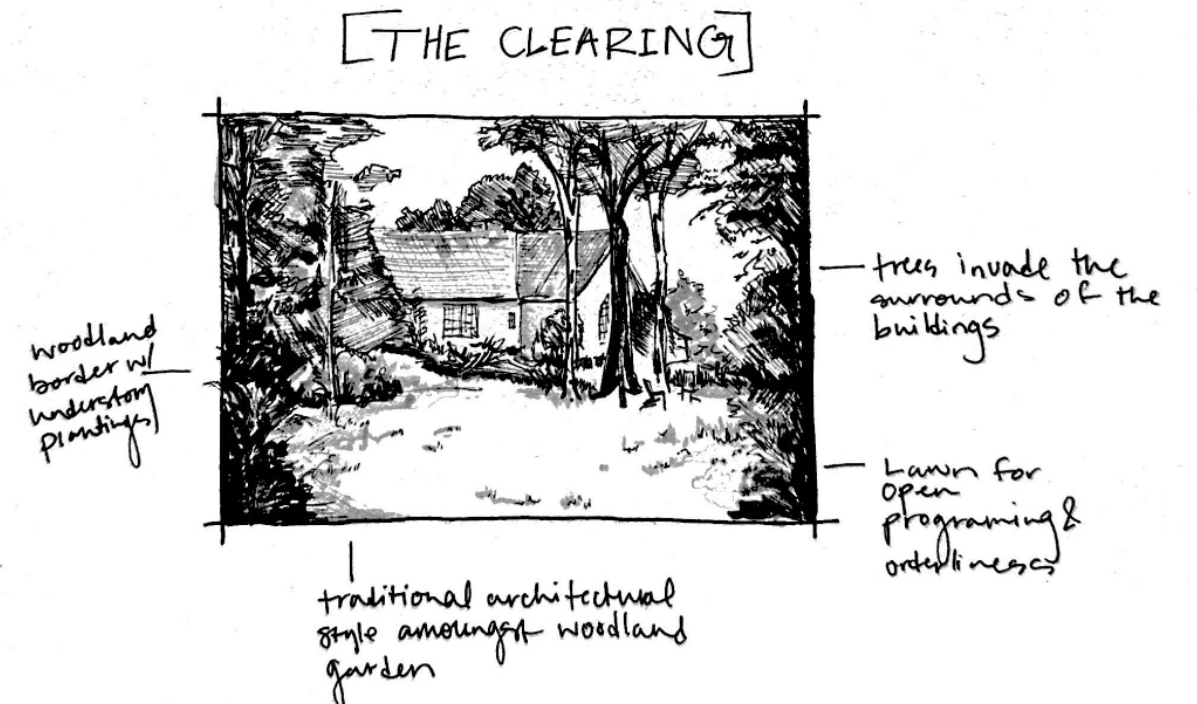
(Matzke, 2014, p. 174) Thoreau’s environmental ethics would later influence writers such as Aldo Leopold. (Matzke, 2014, p. 186) In Thoreau’s philosophy we see strong reasoning for the preservation of the natural world. He advocated that people are not passive towards the environment. Matzke notes that, “Thoreau thinks, for example, that we find just as much beauty in the world ‘as we are prepared to appreciate,—not a grain more’” (Matzke, 2014, p. 175) For landscape designers this is an interesting concept to propose. It reasons that an experience of a landscape can never be truly objective, as it depends on the mind viewing the landscape. This potentially includes tastes. A person may be more inclined to perceive a landscape as beautiful if it meets their personal ideal, and likewise prejudiced against a landscape being beautiful if it strongly disposes of their personal ideal. However, that may not be the end of the matter. Designers may have certain measures they can take to make the viewers more “prepared to appreciate.” Certain elements and visual cues in a landscape may make the public aware that there is something there to be appreciated. Signage, trails, screening, and levels of accessibility may all have the ability to influence public perception of a site. Also, in Thoreau’s words we can find the idea that enjoyment of landscape requires active participation. This seems to influence contemporary landscape design. The current conversation of landscapes not being viewed as stagnant creations, but as dynamic ecosystems, necessitates discussing the level of personal ownership that should be taken in a garden. Is the level of enjoyment gleaned from a garden directly dependent on personal involvement? Does lack of personal investment correlate to less enjoyment of the natural world? This branches into a larger discussion on the definition of stewardship.



Birnbaum, C. (2002). *The Clearing 1* [Photograph]. <https://www.tclf.org/landscapes/clearing>

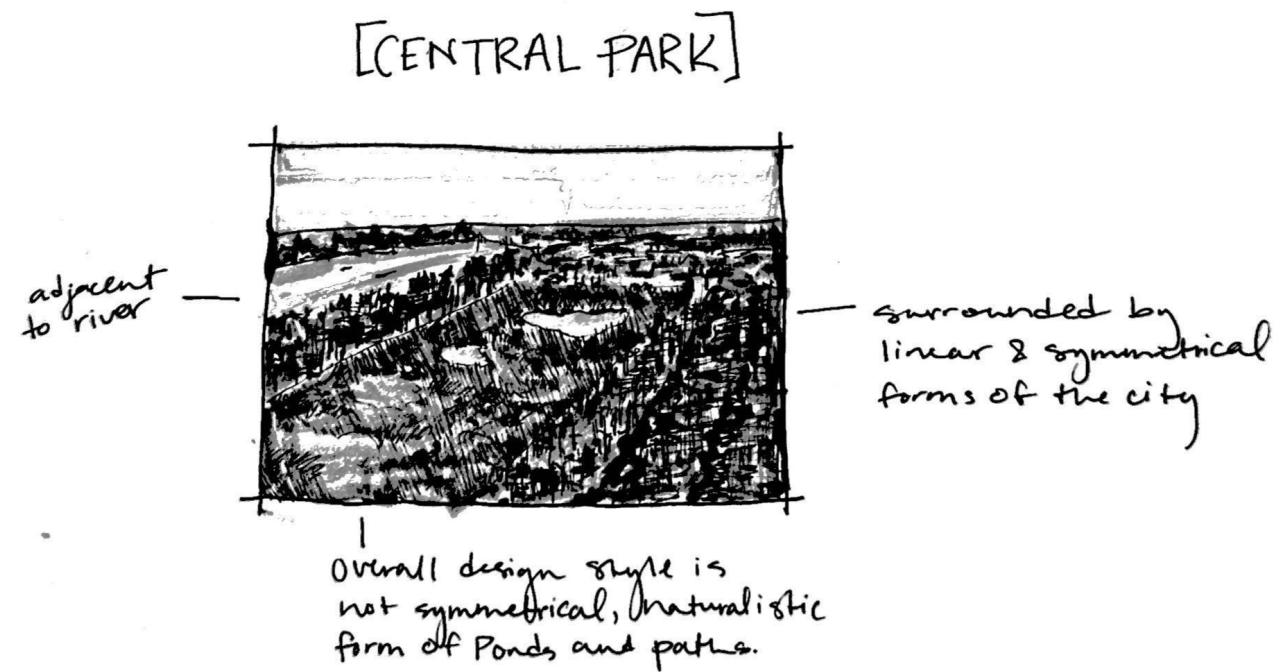
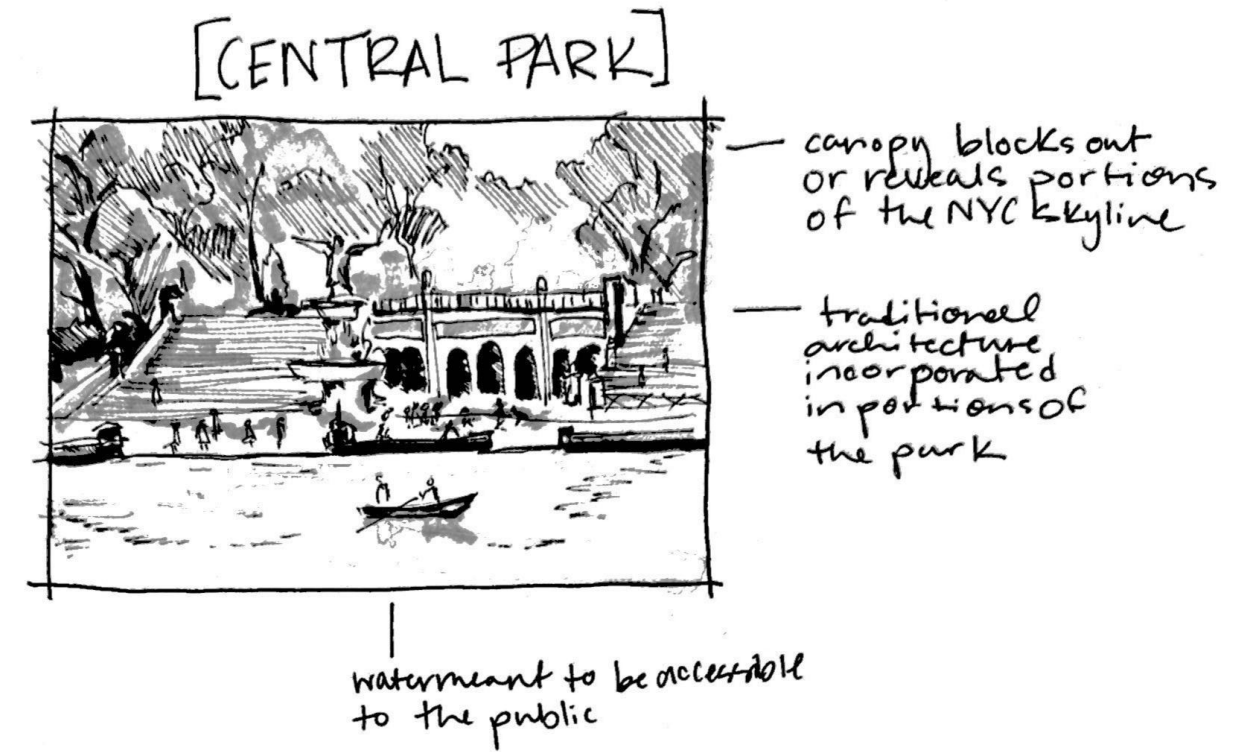


Birnbaum, C. (2002). *The Clearing 2* [Photograph]. <https://www.tclf.org/landscapes/clearing>





Olmsted Network. *Central Park 2* [Photograph]. <https://olmsted.org/sites/central-park/>



Olmsted Network. *Central Park 1* [Photograph]. <https://olmsted.org/sites/central-park/>

Science Versus the Soul in Understanding Nature

In his personal memoir, C.S. Lewis described his particular appreciation of nature as a boy. He said, “I came no nearer to what some would regard as the only genuine love of nature, the studious love which will make a man a botanist or an ornithologist. It was the mood of a scene that mattered to me”. (Lewis, 2017, p. 93) Both the scientific and poetic appreciations of nature are valid means of realizing nature’s beauty. In today’s time however, it seems to be the ecological wonder of landscapes that gets more of the spotlight. Conservation is beautiful for its preservation of the many living things that occupy the landscape. To use a specific example, being able to quantify that native bird populations have gone up, is one of the highest forms of praise for any ecological designer. But it may be beneficial to examine further why native birds give us such a gentle thrill through their presence. In the poem, *The Eagle*, Lord Alfred Tennyson illustrates the power and beauty of that striking bird.

The Eagle
Lord Alfred Tennyson

*He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ring’d with the azure world, he stands.*

*The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.*

(The Eagle, n.d.)

Tennyson paints the landscape vividly, it is an imposing and lonely landscape with harshness yet touches of the sublime. In this “azure world” the eagle breaks through as a powerful living thing,

“Like a thunderbolt he falls”. It is this contrast in between the serene and dynamic that make the poem so easily envisioned.

In nature there is the immovable, the moving, and the active. The “mountain walls”, the “sea” that “crawls”, and the “thunderbolt” that “falls.” The active animals that exist in landscapes can be commonly grouped in the dynamic quality of landscapes. While they are constant in their existence and perpetuity, as individuals they are active forces beyond rules of motion. An eagle falls searching for food in accordance with his nature, but it cannot be predicted when he will fall, he acts outside of patterns in this regard. Animals enchant from their balance of predictability and their defiance through activity.

Humanity acts in much the same balance. When witnessed in the natural world clarity is gleaned from observation. What we know to be true of human society is plainly observable in the simplicity of the behavior of wildlife. Patterns carry through, but what a comfort to observe them in simplicity through the behavior of birds. This analogy undoubtedly carries through in the less beautiful parts of nature, the wildness of predator and prey, but let’s not dwell on that part. For, now let us dwell upon the *Peace of Wild Things* conveyed beautifully by Wendell Berry.

The Peace of Wild Things

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

(Berry et al., 2016)

There is comfort in continuity. Continuity is the great characteristic of nature. Succession is always present. Even amidst setbacks, successional stages begin again undaunted by the progress lost and the struggles gained. When a forest is lost to wildfire, the undergrowth comes back, the trees come back, it doesn’t look the same for a long time, but it is heading in a worthy direction.

What if we were to be less cognizant of time. When we acknowledge that the peace provided to humanity from nature is not necessarily dependent on what successional stage it is in, but more about its mere presence, a different standard is created for designers. Sure, the redwoods in Yosemite may comfort more than the freshly planted sugar maples that line the streets of a new housing development. Could this be merely because of context? The size and protected surroundings of Yosemite give the feeling that everything is in its place as it should be. If not completely naturalized, at least stewarded with the health of the forest in mind. The context of the sugar maple exists in the necessary development of land to support housing needs, but it does not scream constancy. The housing is new

and the landscapes suspended. All gardening in one form or another is suspending succession. But there are different degrees of this. The lawn, tree, and mulch landscape are at the more severe end of this spectrum. There is nothing wrong with this. For some it is their standard of the ideal landscape, it is managed, reliable, and aesthetically consistent. Yet for many, human cultivated consistency does not equate to the constancy found in nature. The balance of these, consistency and constancy, is the line that gardening walks. We seem to operate on extremes in this area. On vacation we leave the consistency of our tended yards to spend time in the “raw beauty” of national parks, or go on hunting trips in minimally managed BLM lands. There is no sense in arguing that a parking median can contain the same majestic and unmanaged beauty of an expansive national park landscape. Human settlement necessitates some form of orderly urban planning. Yet, instead of bare mulch with a tree, layered planting may be incorporated, and different successional stages may be allowed to develop. The presence of succession evokes continuity.

What is Owed?

Do designers and artists carry a moral responsibility in their work? This answer partly depends on how art is defined. Is art primarily for the enjoyment of others, or additionally as a means of communicating that transfers the internal to the external as Philosopher Roger Scruton suggests in the documentary film. (Lockwood, 2009) If art is merely an expression of an individual’s thoughts and personal feelings, and it has no responsibility toward other viewers, then there is no responsibility of what art must be. Arguably, if it is an artist’s intent to be completely free of social responsibility or being simply cognisant of his viewers, then his work may and perhaps must break out of the aesthetics commonly held to be pleasing to humanity. If art is a social endeavor, one that extends far beyond ourselves, then there naturally follows a responsibility to others. When discussing the aesthetic obligation of artists, Oxford philosopher Alison Hills says there is potentially “an obligation to create valuable works of art (an obligation that binds those capable of that kind of work)” (Kirchin, 2025, p. 256) When she says specifically that the obligation applies only to those capable of that kind of work, it illustrates a key point. There is no pressure for art to be anything in particular, only that there is a responsibility for an artist to undertake their work to the best of their capabilities. Adopting this mindset is what furthers beauty and creativity within a society.

If there is a responsibility to create to the best of an artist’s capabilities, there seems to be both a personal and social responsibility. If there is indeed a social responsibility of artists, then to what standards must they hold their work to. This differs depending on the scope of work. If a project is residential, then the designer has an aesthetic responsibility to the tastes of the property owners. The degree to which they are responsible to neighbors depends on the proximity of the neighbors and client’s residences. Public works have a responsibility to the public. Parks should reflect the aesthetic values of the public that will use that green space. It should be noted that these are modes of thinking for a designer, and not rules to be enforced. Enforcing standards of aesthetics would go against the notion of beauty not containing a variety of tastes. It would limit creativity. The way of ensuring beauty remains a chief objective of any designer, seems to be through education on what constitutes beauty. And it does seem that beauty is the chief objective of a designer. In landscape design beauty is

not antagonistic to utility. Fortunately, elements of the natural world have been established as commonly being held as beautiful. This means that there should not be conflict in creating ecologically sound landscapes that are beautiful. A lack of beauty could not be attributed to the plants themselves, only to the form of the design and the elements chosen to be combined by the designer. Additionally, if landscapes have such power to influence the individuals of a society, designers have a responsibility to create work worthy of being viewed for generations. Landscape design should not be viewed as a temporary medium, but it should instead endeavor to represent a timeless beauty that is affecting to the minds and hearts of its viewers. Sustainability is meant to preserve future generations' ability to meet their needs, yet a crucial part of this is remembering how to meet society's needs from the environment. Society needs much more than just resources from the environment, beauty is just as important for the health of society's souls. Our preference for utility makes us ask "What's the use of beauty?", to which philosopher Roger Scruton cites the words of Oscar Wilde, "All art is absolutely useless." (Lockwood, 2009). Use and value are not the same.

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