

# Conference Reviews

## Sound and Scent in the Garden

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library  
and Collection / Harvard University,  
Washington DC

9–10 May 2014

Review by Nadine Schütz, ETH Zurich

Have you ever strolled through the flourishing gardens at Dumbarton Oaks on a sunny spring day? Colourful planting patterns—varying according to different garden themes—attract different species, which admire or inhabit them and enable them to be immersed in fragrance, their voices evincing the garden's sonic presence. In the lower part of Dumbarton Oaks, where taller woods grow, the meadow is still a bit wet from being watered in the early morning. It diffuses an earthy smell that complements the effect of tree shadows and wind brushing the skin, accompanied by a gentle rustling of the foliage—a chilling synaesthetic experience.

Indeed, this place seems predestined to host a symposium on Sound and Scent in the Garden. Yet, this is a topic that our time demands—an era in which visions for a global economy of natural capital are promoted by the image of whispering cars and aqueous vapour in green-tinted cities. The event was convened by Dumbarton Oaks' Senior Fellow, and Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, D. Fairchild Ruggles, and brought together a vivid mix of established voices and young researchers to explore 'the ways that the historical experience of sound and scent can be recuperated, and explain the meaning of those senses for landscape design, past and present'. [1]

Different social and cultural contexts have a significant impact on how people perceive their environment and attribute meaning to it. This aspect was repeatedly highlighted throughout the two days of the conference, assembling contributions about the activation of scent effects in the medicinal practices of ancient Greece (explored by Alain Touwaide), the synaesthetic reproduction of a Persianate garden sensation from a sixteenth century poem (presented by Mohammed Gharipour and Manu Solti), the demonstration of Louis XIV's power as evinced through the 'eternal spring scent'—effected by means of im-

ported flowers (as depicted by Elizabeth Hyde)—or the subtle relationship between music and natural sounds in the Chinese garden tradition (analyzed by Yu Zhang). This diversity allowed for understanding fundamental conceptual differences as discovered, for instance, in the presentations by Hyde and Zhang: while in Louis XIV's garden the omnipresence of spring scent creates symbolic value, in Chinese gardens the sound of the zither is celebrated by its absence which, in turn, allows for an appreciation of the sound of natural elements.

While most papers drew on words and images to reconstruct sensual garden experiences of the past, the topic was also addressed by special inputs challenging direct perception in different scenes across the Dumbarton Oaks gardens. The 'Scent Lab' on the Music Room Terrace consisted of an array of fourteen bottles containing distillates of different plants. Conference participants were invited to identify the individual scents by naming, characterizing, and associating them. As an extension of this set-up, the original scent composition of the 'Herb Garden' on the Arbour Terrace was reconstructed by the use of historic plants. At the Lover's Lane Pool, artist Hugh Livingston created a sound installation in which melodic piano phrases, whooshing wind noises, and abstract clicks were played back on a set of loudspeakers mounted on acrylic tubes sticking out of the mirroring water surface. Interacting with the sounds already present *in situ*, Livingston's installation provoked a more conscious reflection about listening conventions: while we are taking the rustling of the nearby bamboo grove for granted and, therefore, tend to miss its subtle variety, we simply ignore the sounds of the aircrafts flying overhead at short intervals, because they do not fit in with our concept of a 'garden'.

Theoretically, the modern idea of landscape, shaping our thought even today, is largely discussed in terms of its representation through visual media. Similarly, most established design methods are based on visual instruments. This *déformation professionnelle*, fostering the neglect of hearing and smelling in the disciplinary conception of landscape, was mirrored in John Dixon Hunt's presentation. He observed that writers of literature seem to be more sensitive to sounds and smell than landscape and garden writers,

who often omit these aspects. More generally, this observation may be understood as call for a particularly critical assessment of media or research sources with regard to the more ephemeral senses. Accordingly, Anatole Tchikine's lecture revealed that in the academic reception at the beginning of the twentieth century, black and white photography favoured the stylizing reduction of Italian Renaissance gardens to permanent visual forms. In another respect, when Barbara Burlinson Mooney illustrated quotes from early nineteenth century British immigrants' writings about the Midwest Prairie with a variety of bird calls, insect sounds, and wolf calls, it became clear that alone, these replayed sounds could never capture the meaning that the Prairie landscape had for the immigrants, who found themselves far from their home country's well-ordered houses and, instead, exposed to the bemusing polyphonic complexity of wilderness.

All of the different presentations recognized that in order to grasp the role of sound and scent in gardens and landscapes, direct and personal experience was a key aspect—bringing us to our own present. However, the few contemporary design examples mentioned during the two conference days, which treated sound rather as caricature, as well as the omnipresence of noise barriers in our daily environments, demonstrate a lack of integral approaches to sounds and scents in today's landscape architecture. In this respect, we can learn from fragments of the past, understanding them as models for design strategies—engaging sound and scent to create landscape values. But, this requires analytic methods that exceed historical description in order to uncover, for example, the 'embodied' acoustic effect of medieval cloister courts (as suggested by Elizabeth Fowler). It also requires moving away from purely receptive considerations to the active—we have to be able to imagine a water retention basin on top of a pavilion, distributing water to the surrounding garden during the night, and also becoming a central element of monsoon celebrations, due to purposefully shaped pillars serving as pipelines and producing rain-like sounds (as emphasized in the presentation by Priyaleen Singh). This enables us to finally understand that beyond the quiet and odourless, sounds and scents play an important role in reinventing 'natural aesthetics' as a link between large-scale territorial challenges and the scale of human experience,

re-establishing men's sensory relationship to what John Dixon Hunt called a 'better world out there', including not only gardens but also urban environments.

1 [www.doaks.org/research/garden-landscape/garden-and-landscape-symposia-and-colloquia/symposium/sound-and-scent-in-the-garden/](http://www.doaks.org/research/garden-landscape/garden-and-landscape-symposia-and-colloquia/symposium/sound-and-scent-in-the-garden/), accessed 3 June 2014

## Nature and Cities

The University of Texas, Austin

28 February–1 March 2014

Review by Billy Fleming, University of Pennsylvania

The Nature and Cities symposium—a collaboration between the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, the University of Texas, and George Thompson Publishing—convened the leading scholars of landscape and urban ecology to confront the role of landscape architecture under the pall of climate change, ecological degradation, and increasing emphasis on disaster-resilience. Organized by Fritz Steiner, Armando Carbonell, and George Thompson, the symposium intended to reprise the impact of Arizona State University's (ASU) 1991 Conference, which launched ASU's landscape architecture department and generated the highly impactful publication, *Ecological Design and Planning*.<sup>[1]</sup> Carbonell, in delivering the symposium's closing remarks, proclaimed that Nature and Cities would be remembered as landscape architecture's 'Woodstock moment'. Hyperbole aside, the event marked a vital assessment on the state of knowledge within landscape urbanism, urban ecology, and landscape architecture, with a particular focus on North American and Chinese cities. The symposium's collection of established and ascendant voices generated an intriguing collection of ideas about the relationship between cities and nature within the context of climate change.

Nature and Cities was organized around four broad themes: 1) the evolution of ecological planning and design; 2) the impetus of climate change for advancing urban ecology; 3) the problematic city-nature dialectic advanced by The New Urbanism; and 4) the built work of ecological designers and landscape urbanists.

Anne Whiston Spirm opened the symposium by tracing the roots of ecological design through history, from Rome's relationship with water resources through her pioneering work on the West Philadelphia Landscape Project. Spirm concluded her remarks with two requests. First, Spirm called on scholars of landscape architecture to adopt her evolutionary perspective on the field by developing and publishing extensive literature reviews for their respective sub-fields. Then, secondly, Spirm challenged her colleagues to engage with a broader audience by publishing outside of the academic world, in popular press outlets.

As the symposium turned to the projected impact of climate change on cities, Susannah Drake offered a stinging critique of American infrastructure planning and an alternative approach for a federally supported green infrastructure. Dubbed 'WPA 2.1', Drake's plan called for an ecological analogue to the Obama Administration's failed proposal for a National Infrastructure Bank (NIB). However, the issue that sunk the NIB proposal—the absence of a reliable revenue stream—was conspicuously absent from Drake's discussion.

Kate Orff followed, presenting SCAPE's collection of design innovations developed during the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Rebuild by Design competition. Conceived as an alternative to the traditional approach to post-disaster recovery in the U.S. (which generally involves replicating the highly vulnerable pre-disaster land use and housing conditions), Rebuild by Design organized ten interdisciplinary teams of designers, planners, ecologists, sociologists, and engineers to develop 'regional resilience' proposals for the New York region. Orff's proposal for the south shore of Staten Island introduced the concept of living breakwaters as a catalyst for cultural development, ecological function, and risk reduction along the coastline. Building from the oyster-terrace work she developed for MoMA's *Rising Currents* exhibit, Orff described an innovative extension of landscape urbanism beyond *terra firma* and into the sea.

The theme quickly shifted from aspirant to polemical, and Richard Weller fixed his ire on the problematic ideology espoused by the New Urbanism. Weller began by tracing the meaning and iconography of cities over time, using allegory, metonymy, and metaphor to describe

the varying approaches to placemaking that came to define culture in cities. In a blistering critique of the New Urbanism and its dogmatic adherence to the transect, Weller concluded that, in their paradigm, nature was reduced to a binary—redeemer or victim. For ecological design to advance and, perhaps, usurp the New Urbanism, Weller argued that landscape architects must move beyond this dialectic and begin to view cities as nature, akin to the growing scholarship around urban metabolism.

The symposium concluded with the presentation of the exemplary built works of landscape urbanism and ecological design. Though the projects were certainly familiar, James Corner and Laurie Olin provided a unique set of insights. Speaking less to their individual projects and more to the principles that bound them, Corner and Olin outlined what they hoped these landscapes might represent—a blending of art, ecology, and experiential wonder. Their attention to the experience of urban ecology raised an important question: is there a place for people within an urban ecological framework? The field risks marginalization if it cannot conjure a reasonable response to this interrogative.

The absence of attention to urban policy and politics from the symposium raised another question: can urban ecology or landscape urbanism replicate the success of the New Urbanism within the policy arena? The field's abstract nature has yet to translate into a set of policy proposals capable of rivalling the HOPE VI and Choice Neighborhoods initiatives of New Urbanism. While these programmes aimed to revitalize distressed neighbourhoods through principles of New Urbanism, landscape urbanists have yet to translate their conceptual framework into a tangible urban policy construct.

Steiner, Carbonell, and Thompson plan to use the proceedings of Nature and Cities to generate a new book on the state of landscape ecology. Perhaps their contribution to the forthcoming publication can provide an answer to these questions and develop a theoretical framework for the continued evolution of urban ecological design.

1 Thompson, G. and Steiner, F. (eds.) (1997), *Ecological Design and Planning* (New York: Wiley Press).

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