

The Landscape Architecture of Richard Haag: From Modern Space to Urban Ecological Design

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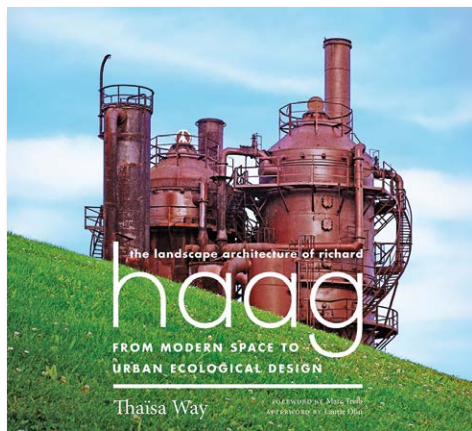
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Thaisa Way

The Landscape Architecture of Richard Haag: From Modern Space to Urban Ecological Design

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The Gas Works Park in Seattle and the Bloedel Reserve on Bainbridge Island—two famous and award-winning projects by Richard Haag—both have a specific chapter devoted to them in Thaisa Way's book *The Landscape Architecture of Richard Haag: From Modern Space to Urban Ecological Design*. They both synthesize Haag's lifework, while, at the same time, express his philosophy and aesthetics, his urge to experiment with the unknown, and his intention to design outstanding ecological and social environments. Yet, they represent the evolution of his design approach, which moved from attention to public, socially, and ecologically challenging sites and issues to a research on the most individual and intimate relationship between human beings and their environment. The Gas Works Park, completed in 1975, has been a role model for the transformation of brownfields into experiential public parks worldwide. Yet (or maybe therefore) it is an eye-opener to read about this urban park as a process, as presented by Way. The driving force behind the process were ideas about, for example, on-site remediation of polluted soil and the ecological significance of land form that had never been tested before, emanating from Haag's deep and broad understanding of a site as a dynamic whole, consisting of materials, volumes, and organisms, under the influence of a diverse array of actors: owners, authorities, political groups, users, and designers. Way offers a narrative of this paradigm of a new way of conceiving urban parks pointing beyond generic, glossy visual renderings of 'industrial cool'¹ (the label borrowed from Swedish ethnologist Robert Willum). With the completion of the sequence of gardens in the Bloedel Reserve in 1985, on the other hand, Haag set in action the gestures of a master, displaying variations of a persistent theme. Any attempt to put a label on this theme would at the same time diminish and vulgarize it, but it is likely a vision of Haag's (maybe born out of a tour to Japan in the 1950s) finding its place at this estate owned by Prentice Bloedel, a client who became an ally. This theme, whispering about man's existence

within nature, takes very different shapes in the four gardens, the sequence itself open to interpretation. Way relates beautifully the collaboration between these two men, by quoting Haag explaining the design as 'a reflection of the garden rather than a document that led to the garden' (p. 173).

As the title indicates, Way's story of Richard Haag and his vast contribution to landscape architecture is related to an important and still ongoing paradigmatic shift in the profession, reflecting the changing character of the interdependence between form and performance.

The book can be read as a biography, starting with the influential role that the place where he grew up, a nursery in Kentucky, had in shaping his interests for the landscape and its management. The choice of education followed suit, in a dynamic period, with important encounters with professors and fellow students. The next chapter focuses on his formative experience in Japan and the instrumental role Japanese culture played in his understanding of the intimate relationship between nature, aesthetics, and experience; as Haag himself said: 'Going to Japan changed my whole life' (p. 25). Haag was a member of the first group of Fulbright fellows who travelled to Japan in 1953–1955. Thaisa Way succeeds in delivering a narrative of Haag as a landscape architect deeply inspired by Japanese culture, but also as a highly influential teacher (sharing with his students his practice as well as his design philosophy), and as an urban environmental activist (inspired by Jane Jacobs and Rachel Carson). Richard Haag never left any of these duties unattended to. He designed, taught, and took part in society simultaneously. The book is, however, according to the author's preface, not written with the purpose of celebrating Haag's work, but rather of using it as 'a lens through which we might discover the emergence of urban ecological design' (p. xiii).

Haag's strong engagement in all-encompassing landscapes is related, also in combination with his sometimes ingeniously simple design solutions, to his early and lifelong contact with Japanese culture, philosophy, architecture, and garden art. Many of his photos from his Fulbright travel to Japan reveal his fascination for the transitions from indoor to outdoor space, or between a building, a garden, and their surrounding landscape, sometimes articulated as views, spatially framed, defining a project's presence and significance at multiple scales.

Richard Haag's own studies, discoveries, experiments, and practices give a necessary background for (or rather parallel to) his maybe most notable mark in history, as founder of and long-time teacher in the landscape architecture programme at the University of Washington. Very much thanks to personal relations, he brought in national and international networks to take part in its development, thereby influencing not only generations of landscape architects, but also (through his societal presence and appreciation) contributing to the general acquaintance and propagation of landscape architecture all over the continent and, somewhat delayed, to Europe.

What distinguishes Richard Haag from many of his likewise famous colleagues from the same period is perhaps that his repertoire and designs were less concluded, refined, and typically referred to as recognizable style. Haag is presented as an example of the landscape architect as a professional, who not only focused on the ongoing project for a specific site, but also placed it in a historical context, as the project served to connect the site's past and its future and, at the same time, as an expression of present conditions. He seemed to be continuously 'on the move', searching for new designs to reflect the evolving knowledge of humankind, its societies, and its environment. The book describes an ingenious and versatile design intellect who, along with Walter Gropius (and many others), worshiped

'unity diversified', but with his very own ideas of spatial relations. Among the modernists, Haag was at the vanguard of environmental issues. But Thaïsa Way's book on Richard Haag is not just a biography of one of the practitioners and teachers of a modern landscape architecture. It is not just a thorough description of Haag's significant projects, thematically ordered to outline the various qualities he became famous for. Neither does this book only give homage to the man who more than anyone else should be honoured for founding and imbuing his spirit in the same educational programme Way herself is a part of. It is all this, but offers something even more outreaching.

If we oversee all the ways in which Richard Haag's career and projects are remarkable, we would still be able to recognize in this book how landscape architecture is an art of synthesis, incorporating the changes of the world, disastrous as they may be, into beautiful and socially as well as ecologically functioning entreties. In this way Haag as a representative reflects the represented. But in this very first monograph on Haag, he is certainly also portrayed as an individual, with a detailed reading of his work, with full references to his texts, and with many references to what and who influenced him as well as on what and how he has been influential.

For being quite a comprehensive account of an unusually productive and influential professional lifespan, affording contextual reference in terms of ideas, persons, movements, and events, this book could be said to be remarkably short, also considering the rich visual material illustrating it. The result, however, is a dense historical narrative. While, sometimes, the text takes a compendious character, the rich and informative notes and index sections, together with the generous bibliography, leave the reader quite content, but also curious for more. (The foreword by Marc Treib and the afterword by Laurie Olin, filling in aspects and details, only

add to this curiosity.) The book becomes bigger than what its title promises and also, richer than its substance. This appraisal of the volume is, at the same time, a critique of the title. Maybe it also questions Way's description of her interest as a historian in taking on the assignment to write this narrative (p. xiii). Her statement that the landscape architecture of Richard Haag shows the transition from the design of modern space to urban ecological design indicates an almost deterministic purposiveness, a journey from A to B. The book's contents, not least by continuous references to Japanese philosophy, give rather an aftertaste of the opposite, of another task: not a direct journey from A to B, but a circular route including both A and B, giving them a common context and a new relationship.

NOTES

1 Robert Willum, *Industrial Cool* (Lund: University of Lund, 2008).