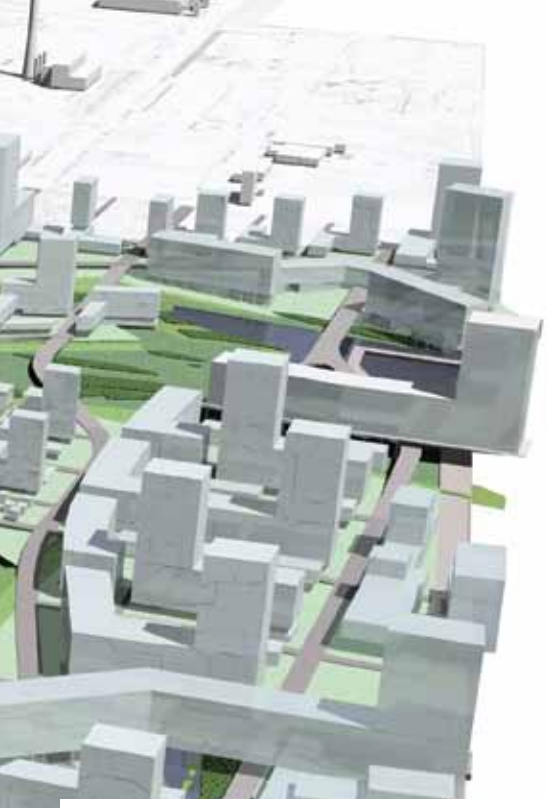
GROUNDSWELL

The rise of landscape urbanism

Charles Waldheim talks with Jeff Stein AIA



Opposite and page 41: The competition proposal for the Lower Don Lands project in Toronto by Stoss (Chris Reed, principal) incorporates principles of landscape urbanism to revitalize a waterfront district at the mouth of the Don River. Renderings © Stoss.

Charles Waldheim was appointed chair of the department of landscape architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 2009, where he is also the John E. Irving Professor of Landscape Architecture. He is the author or editor of numerous publications, including *The Landscape Urbanism Reader* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2006) and *Constructed Ground* (University of Illinois Press, 2001). He was previously the director of the landscape architecture program at the University of Toronto and in 2006 was the recipient of the Rome Prize Fellowship in Landscape Architecture at the American Academy in Rome.

Jeff Stein AIA is head of the School of Architecture and dean of the Boston Architectural College.

Charles Waldheim photo by Siena Scarff/Urban Agency.
Jeff Stein photo by Liz Linder.

Jeff Stein: For centuries, architects have been making buildings and cities — designing what are literally the building blocks of urban environments. Today, as architects talk about greening the cities, their focus is still essentially on those building blocks. But lo, here comes the notion of landscape urbanism, which suggests a completely different approach to the urban environment: the city as a living thing. This sounds like the beginnings of the right solution at the right time.

Charles Waldheim: Landscape urbanism began about 15 years ago as a way of trying to describe what was already going on within urban design and landscape practices. The primary complaint has been that landscape architects are taking market-share away from urban designers and planners, but frankly, the urban design and planning realm has been slow to recognize the increasing importance of environmental factors.

Jeff Stein: Of course, urban design itself is a fairly new discipline, starting in this country after World War II, and using Mediterranean cities of the classical world as precedent — cities that sometimes aren't the best working models for cold climates like ours.

Charles Waldheim: Urban design, to describe the discipline very simply, proposed that the city was an aggregation of buildings. Architecture was seen as fundamental to the city not only as a kind of spatial construct but also as a social and cultural one: If we could get enough buildings organized in a sympathetic way, then we might aspire to the city as a cultural form.

Jeff Stein: Even though automobile-related media — streets and roads and parking lots — in American cities take up as much as 50 percent of the ground plain.

Charles Waldheim: That's actually the basis for one of the critiques of current planning practice that has come out of landscape urbanism. If you have a culture that is fundamentally automobile-based, then an urban model that is anti-automobile is counterintuitive at best. There's a strange precept these days that asserts that people will abandon their cars if we simply build cities that don't accommodate them.

Jeff Stein: Is it fair, then, to say that landscape urbanism isn't design-based? Landscape urbanism talks about process, a framework for looking at the city as a living, changeable entity.

Charles Waldheim: I wouldn't go so far as to say that it's not about design, but it is a different medium. Instead of using buildings as the medium of design, we're using landscapes. That means infrastructure, public space, open space. But part of what you say is true: it's much more comfortable with open-endedness. It argues for ceding certain forms of control to other kinds of controls. For example, landscape urbanism would argue against controlling the heights of buildings and maintaining the continuity of the street wall, which are tropes that come out of an idea about urbanism that overstates the social and environmental benefits of density. Density is a correlate of economic orders: mass automobility, decentralized industrial networks, and private land ownership rights have driven urban form in North America toward lower density.

Jeff Stein: It's true that creating density can be difficult when many American cities are shrinking, especially those in the Midwest. Cleveland and St. Louis are both half the size they were 40 years ago, and Detroit — where you did some work early in your career — is the poster child for the shrinking city; it is actually demolishing buildings.

Charles Waldheim: If our model of urbanism depends upon aggregating buildings for its spatial framework, then it is fundamentally problematic that most of us live in the suburbs. Detroit became a very useful venue for my research when I was

teaching at the University of Michigan: little serious work had been done on it, and it was a great example of how an industrial economy drives a form of spatiality. Detroit allows us to look at the story of globalization, economic shifts, and the spatialization of economic powers.

The majority of metropolitan Detroit's population of five million lives in the suburbs in a relatively affluent condition; the population of the city itself has shrunk by half or more and is economically struggling. The idea of shaping the city through buildings doesn't make much sense, so Detroit has become a good case study for thinking about landscape urbanism in terms of urban shrinkage. Shrinking cities have been largely an academic concern in the United States, but they have been taken up by the German federal government post-reunification. In fact, the Germans have done the most work on shrinking cities, from both the ecological and the design side, and have funded serious high-level federal research.

> Planning bureaucracies are often fighting the last war, if not two or three wars ago.
> *Charles Waldheim*

Jeff Stein: It seems that much of landscape urbanism is focused not on inner cities but on that edge between the densely urbanized center-city and the semi-rural suburb, in which office parks and manufacturing facilities have come and gone, leaving behind brownfields and empty parking lots.

Charles Waldheim: One of the reasons landscape urbanism took hold was that it could be useful as a generalized theory of urbanism in the contexts of both shrinking cities and suburbanization. If automobility is the baseline for your culture; if the majority of the population doesn't live in cities but in suburbs; if you have a culture in which buildings are increasingly disposable because they are of less and less cultural and material value; then landscape emerges as the spatial medium in which you need to work. It used to be that corporations listed buildings as assets and, of course, they still do on financial statements. But they rarely see them as civic assets any more. In the '70s and '80s, signature buildings on the skyline were associated with corporate identity. Then, with the increase in mergers and acquisitions, corporate identities started to change so fast that investments in buildings, especially to promote corporate identity, made less sense. We have the case of the Sears tower, for example, which is no longer about Sears.

Jeff Stein: Or, in Boston, the John Hancock tower.

Charles Waldheim: Right. So now we see corporations pulling their names off buildings and onto stadia because you can buy and sell the naming rights to a stadium irrespective of where your front office is. The flux of capital is happening so much faster than the rate at which buildings change, that it's very difficult to make buildings the kind of iconic civic signifiers that they used to be.

Jeff Stein: And in fact, many of our civic signifiers — those things that somehow define or enrich or give value to the public realm — don't seem to work as they once did. For example, landscape urbanism seems to focus on the creation of public space, yet what is meant to go on in that public space? How do we make it viable and meaningful when so many people connect to one another and to events electronically rather than physically? You mentioned the increasing rate of change. How do you design for an indeterminate urban future?

Charles Waldheim: Certainly one of the challenges of landscape urbanism has been this notion that we've somehow lost the capacity to project desirable public futures apart from private capital sources. You could say the canonical works of landscape urbanism come from the European welfare state: their high-speed rail systems or the Dutch dike systems — big infrastructure projects in which there's a landscape or ecological component. But in North America, we've generally lost faith in the ability of public institutions to deliver public space. Increasingly, we rely on private development — in the form of both the philanthropic donor culture and private real-estate development — to deliver not only private space but also the public realm. Landscape urbanism tries to grapple with that, but also suggests that we can have new forms of public spaces that derive from actual city-making, with a strong environmental component addressing environmental toxicity, brownfield sites, and the complexity of climate change. They don't have to look like a 19th-century city, which has been one of the limitations of the discourse around urban design. And in a context where we don't have strong leverage over landowners, in which municipalities are competing with each other for scarce tax revenue, and in which capital is increasingly mobile, the challenges are real.

Jeff Stein: Beyond its design implications, landscape urbanism relies on some meaningful science, especially in terms of environmental and ecological systems. The Boston Architectural College is working on a green alley project behind our building. Not only will it lessen the heat-island effect in that spot on a sunny day, but it will also help to recharge the groundwater under the Back Bay. We think of it as a little bit of landscape urbanism.

Charles Waldheim: Part of the appeal of landscape urbanism is its comfort with incompletion: small-scale projects such as yours can aggregate and eventually make a difference. Other theories of urbanism or design have tended to need great unifying gestures or continuity.

We do have quite a lot of science available. Adapting it to the urban environment — for example, restoring ecological diversity — can be a challenge. That said, I would say that the greater challenge is that we must work within a policy framework and with public-sector planning bureaucracies that are often fighting the last war, if not two or three wars ago. So a part of my goal is to educate professionals who can work across these boundaries.

Jeff Stein: What are the possibilities for this sort of undertaking in the realm of professional practice? Are we doing more than just talking about them? Are there actual projects that reflect this approach?

Charles Waldheim: These are not theories that we invent in the academy and then try to throw into practice. Quite the reverse: a part of landscape urbanism is trying to theorize, after the fact, transformations that have already happened in practice. Over the last 20 years, as architects and urban designers struggled with urban form, complex remediation techniques, ecological challenges, and sustainable building techniques, landscape architects were increasingly recognized for the skill set that they bring to the project team.

I realized landscape urbanism was going to take off when I saw that, if you were in the suburbs outside St. Louis or Chicago, and you had 15 professionals in your firm, and if you were doing what urban planners used to do, you were probably a landscape architect. There's a whole generation of planners who are no longer physical designers, because post-'68, the planning discipline largely abandoned physical planning.

Jeff Stein: It became refereeing.

Charles Waldheim: Yes — it focused on policy and public process and a lot of other important things. But in that tradeoff, planners no longer had the ability or the interest or aptitude, generally speaking, to deal with spatial issues. Urban designers were very committed to a particular model of the 19th-century city, and therefore weren't comfortable with or weren't suited to the problems of the places where most of us lived and worked: the suburbs. So landscape architects emerged to take that on, without any kind of fanfare or theory behind them, just on a day-to-day basis.

Jeff Stein: It's interesting that you yourself are actually an architect. And here you are now, in charge of a landscape program.

Charles Waldheim: My own career path is kind of an exception. But it's also true that the majority of the proponents of landscape urbanism are doubly trained; I would even say it is a characteristic. They often share a combination of training in ecology or landscape and a training in high architectural culture. Chris Reed [Stoss] would be in that list, as would James Corner [Field Operations] and Adriaan Geuze [West 8].

Jeff Stein: You were an architecture student at the University of Pennsylvania, which was home to Ian McHarg, the landscape architect who is widely credited with making connections among landscape architecture, planning, and the environment. Were you one of his students?

Charles Waldheim: He was a professor emeritus, retired but still in the building, although I never studied with him. It was a very interesting place just then, with a range of people talking about the city from different points of view and different disciplinary frameworks.

But Ian's work is undoubtedly what people have in mind when they pose one of the most important questions about landscape urbanism: Well, isn't this just what we've been trying to do for 50 years? Haven't we been aspiring to make better planning decisions, better spatial decisions, about environmental forms for the social justice of our cities? And I would say yes, but the

great heroic Modernists — Ian McHarg at the University of Pennsylvania, Carl Steinitz at Harvard, and others — tended to spatialize ecological data with the expectation that we would make better planning decisions. Those projects have been wildly successful, but they've run into something of a dead end because, broadly speaking, we've decided not to plan any longer. Ian's work on regional ecological planning — the McHarg project, let's call it — benefited enormously from the idea of the welfare state and the understanding that the public sector would use its ability to take land and to organize space. It's one of the great ironies — or perhaps one of the great tragedies — of the McHarg project that the moment that his work began to flourish in the late '60s to early '70s was precisely the same moment when we began to dismantle the welfare state in North America. We now have more ecological knowledge than we've ever had, more scientific knowledge, more ability to apply spatial reasoning, yet we somehow lack the ability as a culture, at least in the US, to make spatial decisions.

Jeff Stein: We do have more ecological knowledge and understanding, but I would add that it's not confined to trained professionals. Americans in general have a broader and more sophisticated understanding of these issues today.

Charles Waldheim: And the rising general literacy and interest in environmental and ecological topics have certainly supported this. But I would also stress that landscape urbanism was developed in some ways as a direct critique of New Urbanism.

Jeff Stein: I've noticed in the literature put out by the Congress for the New Urbanism that they themselves embrace landscape urbanism. Yet they're still, it seems to me, mired in the picturesque. Landscape urbanism is more about — I hate to use these terms directly adjacent to each other — design science. There's a scientific basis for this work that brings a level of complexity to the understanding of the city that we haven't quite had before.

Charles Waldheim: That's a fair assessment. We used to consider environmental science as separate from design culture. Among the strange bedfellows of the present day are these hybrids, and landscape urbanism is one of them, where design culture intersects with ecological knowledge, a combination of two things. This is the essential difference from previous similar forms of practice. In the past, there was a desire for the divergence and professionalization of separate realms. It's certainly true that in the 19th-century understanding of landscape — if you look at the Back Bay Fens or Olmsted's work in Central Park, for example — you see that landscapes and parks were perceived to be an exception to the city. The pastoral, picturesque landscape tradition in America is characterized by the park as a place apart from the city, both morally and physically. Whereas landscape urbanism argues quite the contrary, that the city is itself a place of natural flows, and human beings are embedded in those flows. Landscape urbanism is much more interested in the synthesis between models of the natural world and the shape of the city, as opposed to a contrast between the city and the natural world.

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Jeff Stein: That was the sort of thing that McHarg was doing, though. He made the distinction between city and country.

Charles Waldheim: I think this is actually one of the great limitations of that model, in addition to its vulnerability because of its dependence on the welfare-state public-planning bureaucracy. The McHarg project was very good about deciding where not to build, and then identifying certain places where one could build, but McHarg rarely got to the precise characterization of how to build and in what forms. So he persisted with this idea that there was city and not-city, and of course the moral story was all too simple: the city is bad and the not-city is not bad. We're fatigued these days with that kind of simple morality tale.

Jeff Stein: Almost every publication about landscape urbanism mentions that you coined the term in the early 1990s. Yet you talk about others, James Corner comes to mind, who were doing work on this before you. There's a certain continuity that you fit into.

Charles Waldheim: It's intellectually honest, but also good etiquette, to acknowledge one's debt to those who went before. There were Europeans who were writing — significantly, in English — about why landscape was important in the American city; there was also a similar interesting discourse in Australia. Mohsen Mostafavi, now the dean at the GSD, and James Corner at Penn were also trying to describe this thing. From my perspective, I'm happily surprised that anybody paid attention to this marginal academic exercise. Now we are seeing an interest in ecological urbanism, which represents both a critique of the failings of landscape urbanism and a continuation of its aims, in perhaps more precise terms.

Jeff Stein: The GSD has been trying intently to develop landscape architecture as a powerful intellectual discipline.

Charles Waldheim: This department is the oldest and most distinguished of its kind in the world — I'm not being boosterish, because that's objectively true. So my appointment was an enormous honor.

Jeff Stein: You want to move it forward. Which way is forward?

Charles Waldheim: My appointment was one of four made in the past year; Chris Reed, Pierre Belanger, and Anita Berrizbeitia have joined me, and we will make six new appointments this coming year. For a very small department to have 10 new hires in the space of two years, especially in this economic climate, is I think without precedent. So, without making any claims about what we're going to do next, I would say, stay tuned. Because if you can arrange 10 new hires in a relatively small field, something interesting is likely to happen. ■

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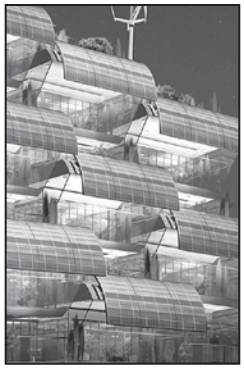

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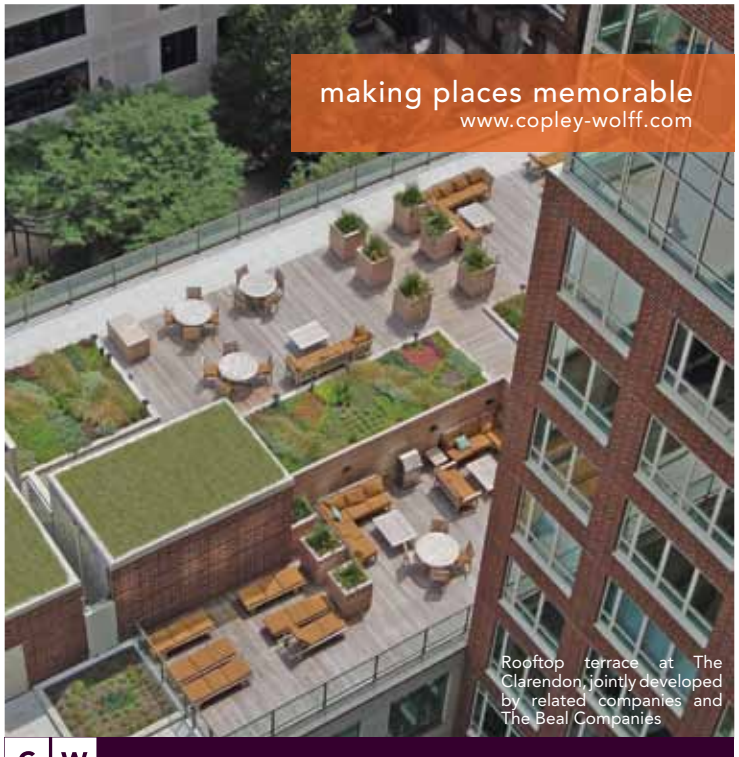

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