

Natural Resource Decisions as Art

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When we landscape architects make judgments about protecting natural resources, we base our judgments on objective information; we learn about soil type or depth to bedrock or vegetation type and we use that information to determine the best use of natural resources. Because natural resource decisions start with objective information, we can trick ourselves into thinking that these are objective decisions. If we do recognize that natural resource decisions are not wholly objective decisions, we may chafe at drawing lines or assigning values that are not justified entirely by objective fact. But lines must be drawn and values must be assigned and even the best information will not draw those lines or assign those values. Inherently, natural resource decisions are creative subjective decisions. In this sense, making good natural resource decisions is like making good art. If we learn about making good art, we may also learn about making good resource decisions.

MAKING GOOD ART

Making good art doesn't come from making calculations. Artists use laws of perspective or optics to express their ideas. Good natural resource decisions don't come from determining carrying capacities or mapping weighting schemes. These tools express planning ideas by quantifying them. The tools are not the ideas.

Good art is not arbitrary personal expression. The artist steps back from her work and sees it as another person might; the artist evaluates the work as communication to others not merely as expression of self. In the same way, good resource decisions are not arbitrary. Good resource decisions do not present merely personal or professional bias for the best use of resources.

If good art and good resource decisions are not made only by manipulating objective information or only by personal feeling, how are good art and good resource decisions made?

In making art, the artist intuitively considers other people; she steps back from the work to examine it through a less personal eye. The artist makes art for other people who, although they have never before seen this art, will recognize and accept it. The artist can do this because she is in some way like other people and she can alternate between her own viewpoint: (What do I see?), and the viewpoint of others: (How does it look?). By using this alternation, the artist acts for other people in judging her own art. The artist needs to know the subject of her art and the artist needs to know the medium of her art; the artist needs objective information. The artist needs to know her personal feelings; she can use those feelings to know how others might feel. But the crux of art-making is communicating, intuitively considering other people.

Making art is risky. The artist can't ask other people, "Will you accept what I am going to make?" People cannot wholly anticipate their reactions to art that does not yet exist. When the art is made, it changes the world by being something new in the world; people living in this slightly different world may find that they like art that they previously wouldn't have thought they would like. By changing the possibilities of peoples' experience, art can make a place for itself. Because the artist alone cannot make her art communicate, her art must attract the concern of others who see and appreciate it. The artist takes the risk that her art will make such a place for itself among others.

Landscape architects also can make good natural resource decisions by intuitively considering other people. That means that a landscape architect, like an artist, must consider not only what people should like (What do I see?), but also what people will like: (How does it look?) The landscape architect alternates her viewpoint just as the artist does. She thinks not only, "Do I think this is a natural resource that should be protected?", but also, "Will other people experience this characteristic as a natural resource?" and "Will other people experience the resource in the same way as I do?" Using this empathy along with objective information and her own feelings, she can find a pattern of resource values.

Like making art, making resource decisions is risky. People may not accept resource decisions; even resource decisions that seemed popular before they were made. By calling a natural characteristic a resource, landscape architects lift that characteristic out of the realm of nature that is taken for granted and place it in the realm of nature that is protected. But a natural resource decision alone will not protect a resource. Resource decisions, like art, need the concern of other people. Good resource decisions will be recognized and supported. Like art, they may have to change the environment, make a place for themselves, before they will be accepted. People's acceptance of new values for natural characteristics may be the most important change that good resource decisions create.

Good resource decisions are like good art in so far as:

- . they are determined by the intuitive consideration of others
- . they require the concern or protection of others
- . they make a place for their acceptance by changing peoples' environment

GOOD ART, GOOD DECISIONS, AND CHANGE

This third description of resource decisions and art says that decisions and art change peoples' experience by changing their environment. Good art changes the future by communicating something that exists now, but that people are unaware of now. Good art changes people's consciousness. Because it communicates something that exists now, and because it changes the future, good art has a time when it no longer speaks about the present; good art has an end.

Like art, resource planning does not merely state popular values; it communicates values that people experience but do not necessarily think about. The value of plentiful and pure aquifer recharge is an example of this kind of unspoken but basic value; good resource decisions make this a conscious value for people. And resource decisions have an end, a time when old decisions are no longer valid because of new technology, social or economic change, or evolution. These changes alter what people call resources, those characteristics people value in the natural environment. It is difficult to imagine a mechanism for purifying and storing water that would be more efficient than the soil-aquifer system, but this mechanism may be developed and if that happens, resource decisions will change.

Finally, we can see that good resource planning recognizes the objective and unchanging qualities of nature as well as the meaningful and changing qualities of peoples' experience. By calling a natural characteristic a resource, by valuing one resource over another, or by using the land to express itself as resource; the landscape architect reveals a set of values. She says "This is the way the natural environment is, and "This is the way people see the natural environment now." Because nature is a closed and unchanging system and because, over time, people change that system and themselves, nature and people necessarily conflict.

The landscape architect must know what is essential to both and communicate not a resolution of the conflict (this can not be done), but communicate the conflict itself, as it stands now.

Reference

Heidegger, Martin, "The Origin of the Work of Art" in Philosophies of Art's Beauty, Albert Hafstader and Richard Kuhns, eds. Random House, 1964.