ABSTRACT

READING MEANING IN DESIGNED LANDSCAPES

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Landscape architects may use artistic expression to create landscapes intended to be not only functional, but meaningful. This thesis was an exploratory study into how different groups read designed landscapes. A literature review was used to trace how meaning has become a consideration in landscape architecture, and how professionals communicate through design choices. The Village of Yorkville Park in Toronto, Ontario was used to explore this topic because it was designed to convey meaning associated with the history and identity of the site. On-site interviews of park visitors and questionnaires with two groups of design students were used to examine ways that a landscape designed with intentional meaning is interpreted. The results revealed that motivation and knowledge of design intent influenced understanding of meaning. The findings presented heighten awareness of the legibility of landscape architects’ design decisions in the expression of intentional meaning, and identify areas for future research.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

“Landscape architectural design involves many layers of understanding, as in viewing a painting, which gives immediate pleasure but then pulls you back to fully appreciate its content and message.” - Pat O’Brien, 1990.

The representation of meaning is an expressive design choice that can be made by landscape architects. There is an artistic element to the profession which allows designers to add creativity to critical thinking and problem solving. Contemporary landscape architects have the opportunity to use their work to create outdoor spaces that are intended to be meaningful to the people who use and enjoy their implemented vision.

However, layering meaning onto the physical features of a landscape can present a challenge for clear communication. When designers are trying to convey a message through the features of their spaces, perception can limit intention. Without an understanding of the landscape architect’s code of symbols, the viewer may not see every layer.

The Village of Yorkville Park was used to trace a message from the design phase to public perception in order to compare intent with understanding. This space was chosen because it is a design that is recognized within the profession of landscape architecture for its intentional representation of meaning. The landscape architects that designed the park created its features in order to convey the history of the site and the distinct Canadian landscapes that can be found in Ontario. This example of intentional meaning allowed for the exploration into communications between landscape architects and their audience.

Problem Statement

“Can we afford to ignore our audience? My answer: It depends on who our audience is!” - Martha Schwartz, 2005.

Much of the communication that occurs between people and place is non-verbal, and the features of a designed landscape must speak to the intended meaning. Some designers are content to leave their work open to interpretation, but for landscape architects with the desire to communicate more explicitly, this could be of concern. The message may not be fully understood
if the audience’s perception is not carefully considered.

Landscape architects share a body of knowledge that informs and guides their designs. Students and professionals become intimately familiar with the design process, which involves inventory and analysis, research into the site’s context, formation of their concept, representation of their ideas, and the implementation of their vision. If the choice has been made to include the intentional expression of meaning in the concept, the ideas may be very clear to the designer - but what about the audience? Without the same background, will the viewer be able to read the message based on the landscape architect’s design decisions?

**Goal and Objectives**

The goal of this exploratory study was to investigate how different groups read intentional representations of meaning in designed landscapes. The objectives to meet this were:

1. To develop background knowledge of how landscape architects represent meaning through design.
2. To establish what is known about the ways that designed landscapes can be read and the influences on perception.
3. To explore how different groups read a landscape with intentional meaning in comparison to the landscape architect’s intention.
4. To analyze the implications of these findings for landscape architects aiming to communicate clearly to their audience.
5. To identify areas of future research within the profession of landscape architecture related to the expression of meaning.
**Thesis Organization**

This thesis is organized into six chapters. The first chapter includes an introduction to the topic, the research problem, and the goal and objectives of this exploratory study. Chapter 2 is the integrative literature review that describes the evolution of meaning in the profession, how it is represented, and the gap in knowledge that this thesis addresses. Chapter 3 describes the Village of Yorkville Park, which was used to explore meaning in landscape architecture, and the methods that were used to conduct this research. Chapter 4 presents the results and how they were analyzed. Chapter 5 discusses the major results and their relevance for landscape architecture and the limitations of the research. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis and outlines the potential for future research.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

The literature review helped to gain an understanding of how meaning has evolved as a consideration for landscape architects. This stage of the research revealed when designers started to express themselves with more intensity and how representations are formed in the landscape. This information led to an investigation of visual literacy and design literacy. A designer may be deeply aware of their message, but connection to the audience may be broken if communication is not successful.

Landscape architects can think critically and imaginatively to solve problems of form and function. However, designers do not have to strive strictly for beauty and practicality. The artistic dimension of the profession allows designers to make choices in spatial arrangement, construction, and visual character that may also include embedded meaning (Olin, 1988). The entanglement of intentional meaning into alterations to the landscape has evolved throughout the history of the profession (Tobey, 1973). Landscape architects today can draw on the ideas of designers that began imbuing meaning into their work dating back to ancient times.

The Evolution of Meaning in Landscape Design

The designed landscapes of classical Antiquity (with the Hellenistic and Roman periods at the centre) symbolized dominance over nature, the power of government, life after death, exploration into philosophy and the pursuit of pleasure (von Stackelberg, 2013). Both ancient Chinese and Japanese landscape design traditions strongly demonstrate the intentional representation of meaning. For example, Chinese gardens were inspired by poetry, spirituality and paintings, and the Japanese used symmetry and plant selections to form the designer’s vocabulary (Randhawa, 1976). Both of these cultures used built and natural elements to create their symbolism (McIntosh, 2005). The gardens significant to Egyptian burial sites and rituals, and the philosophical gardens of Ancient Greece are also early examples of landscapes in which meaning is an intentional component (von Stackelberg, 2013).
Continuing to reflect religious themes, design during the Medieval Age involved creating gardens with meaning that was Biblically derived. In particular, the Garden of Eden, the power of man, the beauty of a woman, and the perfection of God were prominent subjects in landscape design, literature and art at this time (Bauman, 2013). The connection that can be made between art and nature was explored further during the Renaissance (Comito, 1978). The arrangement of spaces such as these were representative of the themes, or ‘topoi,’ determined by the designer; examples include the Villa Medici, the Villa D’este, the Villa Lante, and the Chateau Versailles (Morgan, 2013).

The representation of meaning during the Enlightenment then shifted focus towards the reflection of political power. Landscapes were designed as symbols of wealth and reflected the status and sophistication of the landowner (Pregill & Volkman, 1999). Stowe and West Wycombe in Buckinghamshire and Kew Gardens in London illustrate how the aesthetic created by the designer can communicate a strong message to the viewer (Eyres, 2013). Technology continued to advance, and the changes brought about by industrialization were reflected in the gardens designed during the 19th century (Pregill & Volkman, 1999). As farmland was depleted by urban expansion, landscape design reflected the advancements of the period and a longing for the rural past, which can be seen in the creation of urban parks such as Regent Park in London and Birkenhead Park in Liverpool (Schenker, 2013).

Moving into the Modern Age, landscape design was able to draw upon many influences from both the past and present. The twentieth century involved exploration into the use of plantings in beds and borders as well as the benefits of native and organic plant selections (Dixon Hunt, 2013). It was also a time of creativity and at the end of the century, many writers in philosophy, geography, anthropology, art, architecture and landscape architecture were exploring the trials and techniques for the deliberate articulation of meaning (Dixon Hunt, 2013). Designers were using their artistic ability to experiment with style and the expression of their messages. However, research that was being conducted regarding relationships between people and place sparked the realization that designers and their users do not necessarily respond to
environments in the same way (Rapoport, 1982). Unique designs that demonstrate the innovation emerging during this period include Martha Schwartz’s Bagel Garden, Harlequin Plaza in Denver by George Hargreaves and Las Colinas near Dallas by Jim Reeves and Dan Mock (Olin, 1988).

**Meaning in Contemporary Landscape Architecture**

Landscape architects began to weave messages and stories into their work more consciously in the 1970's and 1980's with the use of patterns that intertwined physical and symbolic elements (M’Closkey, 2013). At this time, the study of environmental philosophy began to have a strong focus on the relationships between people and place that result in the representation of meaning and identity (Mugerauer, 2014). The artistic and expressive capacity of the profession continued to be explored into the 1980’s and 1990’s, breaking away from Modernist thought which rejected history (Treib, 1998; Gillette, 2005). Post-modernism then began blending art into place, making it a part of everyday life. In this movement, which still exists today, communication occurs through the use of codes and symbols that reference ideas, history and/or culture (Relph, 1987; Jencks, 2011).

Landscapes of this type are multi-dimensional and the idea that landscapes can have layers was a prominent theme that emerged from the literature (Olin, 1988; Olwig, 1996; Manzo, 2005; Alon-Mozes, 2006; Kucan, 2007; Keravel, 2010; Van Assche et al., 2012; Mugerauer, 2014). The physical qualities of the site are immediately striking, but there can also be an intangible level to the experience. Contemporary landscape architects can choose to create designs that engage people physically, visually, and intellectually.

**Landscape Narratives**

Landscapes are able to tell stories (Watts, 1957; Spirn, 1998; Potteiger & Purrinton, 1998; Baker, 2004; Herrington, 2007). The relationships between people and place can form documents that act as a record of human life (Scazzosi, 2004). Individuals and groups reflect their culture,
traditions, and identity in the way they use, alter and value their surroundings (David & Wilson, 2002; Low & Lawrence-Zuniga, 2003; Corbett, 2006; Metro-Roland, 2011). Landscapes are the settings for the built and natural forms that are designed to fit social, political and cultural needs (Constant, 2012). The meaning that results from these relationships always exists and can occur naturally, but designers can also intentionally convey their own story or message.

The narrative capacity that landscapes have is what can help people understand meaning through experience (Mugerauer, 2014). Inner thoughts and ideas are linked to outward, artistic expression and design, and this is what can be used to give the physical elements of the landscape deeper significance (Arntzen, 2008). The symbolism and metaphors used creatively by designers provokes thought and can allow the viewer to decipher meaning (Dee, 2001). Choices in spatial arrangement, construction, and aesthetics are used to create meaning specific to the the landscape architect’s vision (Olin, 1988). The forms that tell the stories of past and present can be used by designers to evolve the profession and to continue to build a meaningful future (Mugerauer, 1995; Olin, 1988).

**Reading the Landscape: Perceiving Visual Space**

Perceiving visual space occurs when an observer experiences a place within an amount of time. Objects and light stimulate the brain, which then results in perception for the viewer. The act of perceiving is triggered by these stimuli in a person’s external environment and is followed by a conscious experience (Hershenson, 1999).

Vision allows for the identification of features and the recognition of patterns. Understanding occurs when the brain is able to link and connect images to gain information from a space. The relationships between these visual features are analyzed in the brain to piece together a message (Barlow et al., 1990).

Reading a designed landscape involves interpretation of the visual language created by the designer. Communication between people and place, object and interpreter, is primarily non-verbal. For the landscape architect, the visual skill they must possess is the ability to write legibly,
while the viewer must be able to receive the message from what they see during their experience of a place (Moore, 2003). Sight and movement is how a viewer gathers information, analyzes it and uses their imagination to read and perceive (Jacks, 2007).

The ability to read and understand images is known as visual literacy. The term was first used in 1960 by John Debes from Eastman Kodak, the American technology company, and the topic has been studied and discussed increasingly in the last century as visuals are shared through perpetually advancing technology (Felten, 2008). The concept of visual literacy has been related to “the study of art history, iconology, and visual culture” (Mitchell, 2008 p. 11). These disciplines are familiar with the analysis of images and have developed methods for the reading of their messages (Feldman, 1976). To be literate in ideas communicated through design is to have an understanding of the processes of inquiry, concept formation and problem solving (Pacione, 2010).

Transmitting information through visual communication is much more unclear than communication through words, as multiple meanings can be drawn from the same image - far beyond what a designer may have intended (Feldman, 1976; Goin, 2001; Gillette 2005; Corbett, 2006; Howells & Negreiros, 2012;). The use of imagery alone makes the explicit communication of a message very difficult to achieve. This is a challenge for landscape architects who are trying to communicate through their work, and it is the reason why images and words are often coupled in order to control the perception of design intent (Trieb, 1995). In landscape architecture, for example, interpretative panels could be used to explain the meaning of a landscape.

There are also a number of factors that influence perception. In order for people to accurately read a landscape they must have experience in doing so, and/or knowledge of the cultural background of the site or of the subject matter being represented (Waterton & Watson, 2010). Social and cultural influences mean there is the potential for the intended meaning of the designer to be skewed, owing to the proposition that the identity of a place is largely shaped by the visitor’s personal identity, which they project onto their surroundings (Daniel & Cosgrove,
The Challenges for Designers

Landscape architects are able to create designed settings that present the opportunity for interaction between site users and the features of a space. When a designer wants to convey meaning, they form their message through design choices that will be read and interpreted. It is these choices that the designer has control over, and the elements of their implemented vision can be used to stimulate the thoughts of the interpreter. Experience, memory and triggering of the senses allows for the recognition of the patterns and symbols created by the designer (Motloch, 2001).

To be able to look beyond personal identity and ideas of social and cultural norms is a requirement of accurate reading (Mugerauer, 1995). This may pose a problem for designers because without enough experience, most people read without guidance and may not see the full depth of significance that a landscape holds (Spirn, 1998). When a disconnect occurs between a designer’s intention and public perception it may be caused by a lack of a shared visual vocabulary (Bell, 2004). This means that the designer’s thought process and language of symbols may not be fully legible to their intended audience. Intricacy at the conceptual stage of design may not be enough to create a clear path for the message to reach the viewer. Without shared design knowledge and experience and background information regarding design intent, the meaning may be lost for a landscape architect’s audience (Trieb, 1998).

Summary

A message will not reach its final destination if ideas are not presented with enough clarity. It has been noted that perception is very difficult to control for anyone who wants to represent ideas visually. Without words, interpretation may be so open that the viewer filters what they see through their own background and experience. Many of the authors whose writings were reviewed discussed these issues, but there was a lack of deep investigation into
design literacy - particularly within the profession of landscape architecture.

No studies were found documenting the perception of an implemented vision in comparison to the designer’s intention. There were also no studies found that explored how design knowledge helps landscape architects to read landscapes. Communication and understanding for both designers and their audience has been investigated using the research methods described in Chapter 3. Interviews with site users at the Village of Yorkville Park and a questionnaire with design students were used to understand influences on the perception of intentional meaning.
Chapter 3 Research Methods

This chapter outlines the research methods used to examine interpretation of meaning in designed landscapes. The meaning embedded into the design of the Village of Yorkville Park was used to compare how different groups read the park’s meaning beyond its physical features. The background, layers of meaning, and design features of the Village of Yorkville are first presented following by detailed descriptions of the process of data collection.

The Village of Yorkville Park

The Village of Yorkville Park, located at Cumberland Street at Bellair in Toronto, Ontario was selected as the site for investigation into design literacy because it has layers of meaning. In order for the Bloor Danforth subway line to be constructed, Victorian Era row houses along Cumberland Street were destroyed in the late 1950’s. The site was transformed into a parking lot that accommodated commuters despite local residents’ pleas for a public space that would contribute to a sense of community (“ASLA Landmark Award,” 2012).

The city had agreed to build a public park in 1973, but it was not until 1991 that the Toronto Department of Parks, Forestry, and Recreation presented the opportunity to rethink the space with the announcement of an international design competition. Oleson Worland Architects along with Martha Schwartz, Ken Smith, David Meyer Landscape Architects were chosen by a jury of local residents. The concept of creating a park that reflects Canadian landscapes and the history of the area that the designers presented fit with the neighbourhood’s desire for a vibrant community space (“Village of Yorkville Park,” 2012). The conceptual plans by the landscape architects are shown in Figure 3-1 on the following page.

The parking lot had created division in the area and one significant goal of the project was to provide connections with the surrounding context. Embedded into the organization and construction of this space is three layers of meaning. First, landscapes are grouped into five categories to reflect the Victorian style of collecting. The collections are shade gardens,
clearing, lowland gardens, upland deciduous gardens, and an upland conifer garden. Within these categories, symbolic gardens were placed according to the lot lines that were originally on site. The Canadian landscapes of Ontario are represented through a prairie wildflower habitat, rock outcroppings, a marsh wetland, an alder grove, a birch forest, amelanchier and ferns, an orchard, a herbaceous border garden, and a pine grove (Smith, 2009).

Figure 3 - 1 Design of the Village of Yorkville Park
(Image from <http://www.asla.org/2012awards/images/largescale/034_01.jpg>)
The unique features of the park, particularly the 650 tonne rock outcropping, have turned this space into an iconic public outdoor setting. It is well respected and maintained and offers comfortable seating and beautiful views in close proximity to local boutiques and restaurants. The design of the park has received the American Society of Landscape Architecture Award, the City of Toronto Urban Design Award of Excellence, and the International Downtown’s Association Award of Merit (“Toronto Parks: Village of Yorkville Park”, 2012). Most recently, it has also been honoured with the ASLA Landmark Award, as it has become a local landmark since its completion in 1994 (“ASLA Landmark Award”, 2012). Figure 3-2 illustrates the distinct Canadian shield representation and Figure 3-3 depicts the wetland re-creation. Figure 3-4 on the following page shows the birch grove, along with Figure 3-5 which illustrates the pine grove, and Figure 3-6 which shows the water curtain feature.
Figure 3-4 Birch Grove

Figure 3-5 Pine Grove
(Image from <http://architecturalmoleskine.blogspot.ca/2013/03/yorkville-park-toronto.html>)

Figure 3-6 Water Curtain
Data Collection

The data collection process involved opportunistic sampling of groups with varying levels of design knowledge. The respondents were selected in order to examine the similarities and differences in how the meaning of a designed landscape can be interpreted. Once the Village of Yorkville Park was selected for this exploratory study, an interview script was designed to investigate how the general public reads a landscape architect’s message.

The problem-centred interview approach was chosen because the questions could be designed to directly address the goal of the research project. Background information gleaned from the literature review and the evolution of the park’s design was used to create questions that would reflect the central purpose of this research and elicit meaningful responses (Witzel & Reiter, 2012). Site visits were then made to the park before the weather became too cold and the number of visitors declined. For the duration of each site visit, every person in the park at that time was approached for questioning.

Very similar questions were then asked of two classes of landscape design students at the University of Guelph in order to explore how people with interest and/or experience with design read meaning. The first student group was a first year class in the Diploma of Turf Management program. Typically, these students do not come from a design background and their first exposure to the design process occurs in the landscape design course they take in their first year. The Bachelor of Landscape Architecture students represented a stronger interest with design, and the fourth year design studio class was selected to explore the interpretation of more experienced students.

In order to obtain valuable information from the participants, a questionnaire was constructed based on the goal of this project and findings from the literature review (Walter, 2013). It was determined that questionnaires are suitable for this stage of inquiry because they can be designed to reveal attitudes and opinions related to the research. Responses can then be coded and quantified for analysis (Babbie, 1990).

The literature review revealed that understanding of design intent is affected by social
and cultural norms, personal identity, education and experience, and background knowledge of the design. Based on these identified influences, the questions were formed to compare perception and intention at the Village of Yorkville Park. The University of Guelph’s Research Ethics Board reviewed and approved the interview format and questionnaire prior to data collection. Respondents were asked about their interpretation of the designers’ vision, what they viewed as the major features of the park, and what representations they understood. The design students were also asked to describe how they felt their education helped them to read meaning.

**On-Site Interviews**

On-site interviews were used to determine the level of understanding of the layers of meaning within the general public. On three separate occasions, visits were made to the park in order to conduct the prepared interviews. The first visit was during a weekday at lunch hour, and the other two were completed over the course of a weekend. This allowed for conversations with some people taking a brief break during their workday and others with more time available for discussion. The dates of the visits were October 21, 2013 from 11am-1pm, October 25, 2013 from 12pm-5pm and November 3, 2013 from 1pm-5pm. The weather at this time was still quite warm and there were a significant number of visitors in the park that could have been approached.

The initial visit helped to test how effectively the survey design could be used to gauge site users’ understanding of the layers of meaning behind the design of the Village of Yorkville Park. Visuals were added to the interview process as an attempt to trigger deeper and more meaningful discussion and to help people better understand what the designers’ were trying to achieve. Three maps were created – one for each layer of meaning and they were shown to people during the explanation of design intent. The first map as seen in Figure 3-7 on page 18 blocked off the areas that followed the lot lines of the original row houses that had previously been on site. The second map, Figure 3-8 on page 19, depicted the way that the gardens are grouped together in a way that represents the Victorian style of collecting. The final map, which
is shown in Figure 3-9 on page 20, made clear the symbols that represent the landscapes of Canada. The visuals were tested with a group of people without a design background prior to the remaining two site visits.

Each person approached in the park was introduced to the research and the project background. Those willing to participate were then asked the prepared questions designed to elicit their perception of the design intent. The first two questions asked about where the respondents were from and if they had ever visited the park. The purpose of these introductory inquiries was to help explore the influence of design awareness at the analysis stage.

Interviewees were then asked to point out the features of the park that they felt were significant and unique to the space. This was so that an understanding of what elements attracted visitors’ attention could be noted, and also to see if they mentioned anything about meaning without being led by the researcher. Following these questions, the discussions were directed towards the creative vision of the landscape architects.

A brief explanation of design intent was then provided and the three maps illustrated on the following pages that were created by the researcher were shown. With this new information, the participants were asked to look at the park again and see if they could identify features of the park that conveyed design intent. To conclude the interview, each person was asked what they thought the designer was trying to achieve, and what they appreciated most about the space. During these visits, 32% of the people approached agreed to participate. See Appendix A for the site interview format.
The Village of Yorkville Park

Layer 1: The gardens are arranged to reflect the lot lines of the row houses that were historically on the site.
The Village of Yorkville Park

Toronto, Ontario

Layer 2: The gardens are grouped together in a way that represents the Victorian style of collecting.

Figure 3.8 Victorian Collecting
Image by author, 2014
(Based on design from <http://www.asla.org/2012awards/images/largescale/034_01.jpg>)
The Village of Yorkville Park
Toronto, Ontario

Layer 3: The gardens are designed as representations of Canadian landscapes found in Ontario.
**Student Questionnaires**

The on-site interviews discussed in the previous section targeted people without a design background. The next phase of data collection involved questionnaires with design students at the University of Guelph for comparison with the results from the on-site interviews. The first student group was a first year landscape design class in the Diploma of Turf Management program. These students were receiving an introductory course on landscape design. The second student group was fourth year Bachelor of Landscape Architecture students in their final design studio course.

The students were not interviewed within the park. Instead, they completed questionnaires with similar questions to the first phase of data collection within their class time. With the professors’ permission, a presentation was given by the researcher that explained the purpose of the research, and visually depicted the features of the park and the layers of meaning. Photographs, the original master plan and visuals depicting the organization of the designers’ symbols were used to describe the park with as much detail as possible. Each willing student participant was given a paper copy of the questionnaire, which they filled out and returned upon completion.

The students were first asked to provide information regarding where they are from, what program they are in, their year of study and their familiarity with the park. Next they were asked to describe what their initial impressions of design intent were, along with their identification of the park’s major features. The same maps illustrating the layers of meaning that were shown to the on-site participants were then shown to the students. At this point, they noted on the questionnaires the landscape representations they could see, and the clarity of the landscape architects’ vision.

At the conclusion of the questionnaires, students were asked if they felt their education helped them to read landscapes designed with intentional meaning. The last question was of particular importance to the research because it allowed students the opportunity express those aspects of their knowledge that they felt influence understanding. Obtaining this information was
of significance in determining what it is about the design process that could be shared in order to strengthen communication in landscape architecture.

All the responses that the students gave were anonymized. Their names were not recorded anywhere and they could respond with as much detail as they could for each of the questions. They were asked about their awareness of the park and its design, the clarity of the design intent, and the features of the park they felt communicated meaning. The Bachelor of Landscape Architecture students completed the questionnaires on February 12, 2014 and the Turf Management students went through the same process on February 14, 2014. All students that were present on those dates completed the questionnaire. Several of the diploma students were absent on February 14th so their instructor allowed for the presentation to be given again on March 11, 2014. The students present on that date that had not already participated completed the questionnaire.

Summary

The research process was designed to thoroughly explore how designers’ intended meaning is read by their audience through the features of their spaces. The literature revealed how landscape architects can express meaning and the challenges they face in public perception. The influences on interpretation inspired the creation of the surveys and questionnaires. Once all the data was gathered, the findings were analyzed and this process is described in the subsequent chapter.
Chapter 4 Results and Analysis

As described in Chapter 3, the interviews and questionnaire targeted three different groups that each offered distinct perspectives. The exposure to design experience and the level of awareness of the Village of Yorkville Park that each group represented helped to explore the meaning people draw from a landscape in comparison to the designers’ intention. The results from each stage of data collection were compared and provided insight into how people with and without a design background view and experience a landscape with meaning. This chapter presents the findings from the data collection process and describes the results and how they were analyzed. Figure 4-1 and 4-2 illustrates the percentage of the respondents who had visited the park before the interview or questionnaire, and the percentage of respondents with background knowledge of the design intent.

Respondents’ Awareness of the Village of Yorkville Park and its Design

![Figure 4-1 Percentage of Visitors to the Park within Respondent Groups](image)

![Figure 4-2 Percentage of Respondents with Awareness of Design Intent](image)
During the 23 interviews conducted during the site visits, 57% of the respondents had been the park before and 13% had prior knowledge of the design intent. The second group was the Diploma of Turf Management students, and within the 29 students that completed the survey, 24% of the respondents had previously visited the park and 10% had background knowledge of the design. The 49 Bachelor of Landscape Architecture students represented the highest level of familiarity with the park. The entire group had been taken to the site by their instructor and toured the space with David Oleson, the architect who had worked on the project.

Breakdown of Responses

The first step was to read over notes from the interviews and the completed questionnaires. Themes and categories were then drawn from the responses given to each question asked of the participants. The number of responses in each category were then tallied so that the results could be analyzed.

The three most important questions asked of each group delved into the interpretation of intent, recognition of major features, and perception of intended meaning. These questions were as follows:

What do you think are the major features of the park?
What do you think the designer was trying to achieve?
What representations do you see of Canadian landscapes?

The following charts illustrate the numerical breakdown of responses given to the three major questions regarding design literacy. Figure 4-3 to 4-11 depict the major responses related to the major features of the park, the design intent, and interpretation of meaning. The percentage of respondents who answered within each category is presented. By comparing the charts, some common themes became identifiable.
Figure 4-3 Site Users: Identification of Major Features

- Trees: 10%
- Festival Walk: 5%
- Sections: 2.5%
- The Rock: 30%
- Seating: 15%
- Peaceful Setting: 10%
- Green Space: 7.5%
- Pine Grove Planters: 7.5%
- Water Feature: 12.5%

Figure 4-4 Turf Management Students: Identification of Major Features

- Trees: 19.7%
- Festival Walk: 11.5%
- Sections: 4.9%
- The Rock: 27.9%
- Marsh: 8.2%
- Herb Garden: 1.6%
- Prairie Garden: 3.3%
- Visual Attractiveness: 6.6%
- Materials: 3.3%
- Water Feature: 13.1%

Figure 4-5 Bachelor of Landscape Architecture Students: Identification of Major Features

- Trees: 19.8%
- Festival Walk: 8.3%
- Sections: 7.3%
- The Rock: 47.9%
- Seating: 7.3%
- Plantings: 3.1%
- Victorian Architecture: 1%
- Connectivity: 2.1%
- Lighting: 2.1%
- Victorian Collecting: 1%
Assessment of Understanding

Identification of Major Features

The major features identified by respondents during the on-site interviews focused on the iconic elements of the park. The rock, the pine grove planters, the water feature, and the trees were mentioned often. Also frequently discussed was the seating, which is a main attraction for people taking breaks from work, browsing local shops, and meeting with friends. Respondents also recognized the spatial organization in which the gardens are grouped, and the aesthetic quality this arrangement provides.

Similarly to the on-site responses, the major features that were identified by the Diploma of Turf Management students were the rock, the trees in the groves, the water feature, and festival walk. The boardwalks through the Ontario marsh, the prairie wildflower garden, the herb rock garden, the organization, and the distinct aesthetic quality of the space were also mentioned as important aspects. A few responses also described the use of materials as a memorable aspect of the park.

The rock, the groves, festival walk, and the seating were the most distinct features to the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture students. Also noted was the grouping of landscape representations, the seating, the lighting, the connectivity of features and the use of plantings. The Victorian style of collecting and the organization based on the previous lot lines were difficult for all groups to grasp, but this was the only group that mentioned these layers.

Perception of Design Intent

When asked what the site-users thought the designer was trying to achieve, the responses focused mainly on the experiential aspects of the park. Many of the discussions described the space as being appreciated as a social setting. Respondents read the seating areas as an indication of the designers’ desire to accommodate social gatherings in an outdoor setting. The contrast between built and natural elements was interpreted as the intention to provide green space in an urban context. The park is greatly appreciated as a peaceful and enjoyable
escape from intensely paced city life.

After hearing the features of the design explained, the Turf Management students expressed their interpretation of design intent as being an attempt to create a beautiful and enjoyable space with symbolic significance to users. A few of these students were able to recognize the designers’ reflection of Canadian landscape identity in the organization of the space and the distinct style of each section. More predominantly discussed in the questionnaires was the function and experience of the park. Several responses perceived uniqueness, connectivity, and contribution to a sense of community as goals of the designers.

The Bachelor of Landscape Architecture students were able to read with more detail into the layers of meaning in the park’s design. These students recognized the representation of meaning, the reflection of history, and the depiction of landscape identity. They also recognized the park as a multi-use space that connects with the surrounding context. The physical, symbolic, aesthetic, and experiential elements of the design were identified in this group’s responses.

**Understanding of Meaning**

Participants in the on-site interviews were not able to read deeply into the designers’ intended meaning; however, certain features were strongly legible. The rock was the feature that most clearly evoked landscapes of Ontario for the viewers, as well as the overall use of materials. The granite in the walkways and the placement of natural stone in the gardens stood out as representations of naturally occurring landscape elements. The varieties of trees were also perceived as representations to the on-site participants.

The Canadian shield, the Ontario marsh, the prairie wildflower garden, and the birch grove stood out most strongly as representations of Canada’s landscapes for the Diploma of Turf Management students. Less predominantly, students could see landscape identity in the herb rock garden, the Amelanchier grove, and the water feature. A few responses described the symbolism as becoming legible when looking at the design’s overall composition and its combination of colours and textures inspired by natural features.

In this question, fewer categories were drawn from the data collected with Bachelor of
Landscape Architecture students. However, their descriptions went into more depth than the other two groups that were sampled. They had a stronger understanding of the diversity that the designers were trying to convey and were able to see the connections between features, such as the way the individual landscapes comprised a representation of the diversity of Canadian landscapes found in Ontario.

**Summary of Interpretations**

The on-site interviews indicated that the Village of Yorkville Park is greatly valued and respected. The participants during this stage of data collection found this to be evident in the absence of vandalism and the level of maintenance that keeps the park pristine. Visitors enjoy the natural and social elements of their experience and appreciate the beauty it brings to the area. This group interpreted the experiential and aesthetic aspects of the park as the objective of the designers, and struggled to perceive intended meaning as a part of their experience. The visual qualities of the space were recognized, but the beauty was not analyzed - even for the respondents who had been to the park before.

Many of the Diploma of Turf Management students expressed that they were better prepared to see and understand the features of the park than they would have been without their current level of education. All but one student felt that their base knowledge and experience gained through the landscape design course in which they were currently enrolled better equipped them in the reading of a designed landscape. However, many of them still felt that the explanation of design intent allowed them to read the design more clearly. For the students who had previous knowledge of the park, they could respond with more clarity. Without that understanding, many indicated that interpreting the designers’ vision and full extent of symbolism would be challenging.

The combination of experience and familiarity with which the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture students were equipped allowed them to respond with a high level of detail and understanding. Many described their analytical skills as being responsible for their ability
to translate meaning from visual features. They felt that they were able to look beyond the aesthetic and physical experience of a space to examine the landscape architects’ artistic expression. Interest and passion for design were also frequently noted as influences on perception.

**Analysis of Responses**

During the on-site interviews, the visitors at the Village of Yorkville Park were very much focused on the experiential elements of the space. Without design knowledge to guide their interpretation, their personal moments in the park influenced what they viewed as being the goals of the designers. Meaning was not deeply analyzed because the functionality of the park is so successful. The park served as a meeting place, a tourist attraction, a comfortable seating area, or a peaceful place to take a break. The motivation of each individual may be a part of why they could not see the design intent – meaning was not included in their personal reasons for visiting the space.

The sharpest contrast seen in the responses was between the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture students and the site users. Not only had this whole student group visited and been taught about the park, they were at a stage in their education where they felt confident as designers. As many of them expressed, their curiosity and interest in the design choices of other landscape architects caused them to analyze a space beyond its physical inventory.

However, as can be seen in the pie charts, they did not always identify as many features as the Diploma of Turf Management students who were at the very beginning of their education. The landscape architecture students answered with a high level of detail and took only 20 minutes to go through the presentation and finish their questionnaires. This same process took an hour with the Turf Management students and the difference was that these students frequently asked questions during the presentation and while they were filling out their questionnaires.

The process became more of a conversation and this phase may be another indication of
the importance that motivation has to the understanding of meaning. The Diploma students had a strong attitude of learning. They often asked to take another look at the photographs and masterplan so they could see the features of the design and how they connected to form the designers’ symbolism. They were looking harder than the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture students who were more self-assured and missed key features.

The landscape architecture students had the most exposure to design which they demonstrated in their responses. Their design literacy was best illustrated in the explanations they provided regarding the aspects of their knowledge and skills that help to read meaning. Yet, even with this background and their understanding of the design process they did not fully read the message.

The diploma students combined their introductory education, the information presented to them, and their own personal investigation using the design intent. This allowed them to list the same amount of major features and aspects of design intent as the landscape architecture students, and the most aspects of the intended meaning out of all three groups. Both design literacy and visual literacy were integrated to achieve the most accurate reading of the Village of Yorkville Park.

Without knowing where to look, meaning can be difficult to find. At first glance, motivation and the functional aspects of a space may hide a designer’s message. However, with key pieces of information, understanding can be achieved and the message does not have to remain lost. The implications of these findings for the profession of landscape architecture is discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter 5 Discussion

This chapter discusses what the major results of this research have revealed about the understanding of meaning in designed landscapes. The findings have been critically analyzed in order to determine their relevancy for the profession of landscape architecture. The information presented offers considerations for designers aiming to communicate with clarity.

Design Literacy and Visual Literacy: The Connection and Distinction

There were two terms that were uncovered during the literature review. The first, design literacy, involves understanding the creative and critical thinking that designers apply to formulate and implement their innovative ideas. Second, visual literacy refers to the ability to understand information that is being presented through images alone. These are two distinct concepts that both received significant mention in discussions of communication of intentional meaning.

A designer has the ability to choose how they want to present information to their audience. The message of a landscape architect is phrased using design decisions, which forms their vocabulary. Once the ideas are implemented, the message is released and the designer relinquishes control. At this point, the features of the space are then responsible for stimulating understanding for the viewer.

However, design knowledge is not necessarily shared between landscape architects and their audience. Design literacy is therefore not a likely component in every interaction between people and place. Someone experiencing a designed landscape is looking at results of a process and they may not be aware or interested in the steps that were taken. Landscape architects understand the information and events that lead them to their concept, but this progression is not visible in the final product of their work.

An intimate awareness of the elements of design is probably most valuable to designers. If landscape architects can build knowledge that will allow them to write more legibly, their
audience will be more able to read their message. As a result, the ability to clearly communicate through design has the potential to contribute to visual literacy. If design decisions are used effectively, intentional representations of meaning can become visible in the features of a landscape. These two forms of literacy have their distinctions, but they can also become intertwined to link a designer’s intention with public perception.

**Lost in the Layers**

The idea that landscapes can have layers was also a recurring theme in the literature. There are both tangible and intangible aspects to a designed landscape that become part of interpretation. The physical inventory of a space is constant in communication and is formed by the spatial arrangement, built and natural elements, and selection of materials that landscape architects use to serve the function and expression they wish to create. The intangible elements are more challenging to control. These are the experiences, emotional responses, and thoughts triggered by the features of a landscape.

The Village of Yorkville Park was selected for this study because it is not only an attractive social setting, but also a representation of Yorkville’s heritage and of Canadian landscape identity. The meaning central to the landscape architects’ concept attracted the jury to their competition entry when it was submitted in 1991. Now that the park has established itself as a celebrated public setting, the meaning is hidden for many visitors by its function. Some of the confusion and misunderstanding of meaning that can occur is the result of the layers that designers can create.

Previous research has shown how to control the expression of meaning through deliberate design choices that stimulate the viewer, but after construction is complete people experience the landscape architect’s ideas and form their own interpretations. When meaning is on its own layer, separated from function and experience, it has the potential to be lost for the site user. Instead of leaving meaning on an isolated layer, it could be integrated into the way a space functions so that it is not purely visual, but also experiential. Using the Village of Yorkville Park, an example of this approach is illustrated in Appendix C. Creativity and artistic expression
does not have to be a hindrance in the representation of intentional meaning - it can be applied while solving breakdowns in communication.

**Does it matter?**

If the meaning is not interpreted exactly as the landscape architect intended, does it really matter?

The answer is not always. For many designers, leaving their work open to interpretation may be completely acceptable – and even exciting. If the viewer cannot see the meaning, or reads it in a different way than was intended, it does not mean that experience is negatively affected.

Many people interviewed at the Village of Yorkville Park missed the symbolism due to their motivations for spending time within the space. However, those without an awareness of design intent were still able to enjoy and appreciate the park. If meaning is not clear to all members of a landscape architect’s audience it does not mean that the design is unsuccessful. When looking at a painting for example, the viewer may not be able to understand exactly what the artist wanted to express. However, the colour, texture, style, and/or composition could still trigger a response that connects the artist with their audience.

Landscape architecture is a creative profession that can draw on other artistic disciplines. Design literature and criticism in fine art, art history, and architecture has influenced awareness of creative expression, but landscape architecture does not have as long of a history of research related to the expression of meaning through design. The thesis aimed to help address this gap in knowledge.

**Relevance for Landscape Architecture**

All landscapes in some way have meaning whether it was intentionally inscribed by the designer or projected by the viewer. There is a balance that must occur between artistic expression and clarity of representations if a designer wants to share their vision with their viewers. Without consideration of public perception, messages may never be fully received by
the intended audience. Some designers may be content to leave interpretation completely open, but for landscape architects trying to communicate and connect with the people they are designing for - this may present a problem.

The results of data collection and analysis were unexpected. Before the process began it was presumed that the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture students would read meaning most accurately because of their high level of experience with the design process. It was revealed that understanding of meaning was most strongly influenced by motivation and the ability to investigate using background information related to the design intent.

This research is relevant to the profession of landscape architecture because it draws awareness to the legibility of design decisions. Sharing the design process on a societal level may not help our audience to read intentional meaning. Instead, design literacy should be a focus within the profession in order to help designers form a clear message for their viewers.

However, addressing perception may also need to be balanced with other design considerations. Landscape architects should be aware that understanding cannot be completely controlled since multiple meanings can be drawn from one landscape. The implications that this information has for designers could be the simplification of symbolism so that it is more recognizable for their audience. On the other hand, designers could embrace the ranges of interpretation rather than limiting their creativity in order to be more obvious.

**Limitations of the Research**

In order to reach the highest possible response rate, the questionnaires were completed immediately after the presentation was given. The students could take the time they needed to answer the questions and then return the questionnaires directly to the researcher. However, the presence of the researcher could have influenced the way the respondents answered the questions. To address this, the questionnaires could have been completed online or in a location separate from the researcher. If images and information was provided that explained the park, the respondents could have potentially gained enough understanding to complete the
questionnaire. Interviewing all groups in the park could not occur during this study but it would have helped to keep the process more consistent. In addition, gender breakdown was not recorded during data collection and it would have been another interesting area of analysis.

Adding one more group to the respondents could have also added further insight into how meaning can be read and interpreted. The student groups were receiving design education that helped them to build their knowledge and skills, but many did not have extensive practical experience. Designers could have been included in order to explore how practicing landscape architects read meaning. Landscape architects could offer deeper insight into the influence of the design process, as they have more opportunities to see their creative ideas implemented. Design professionals may also have more experience in representing meaning and addressing public perception.
Chapter 6 Conclusion

Future Research

For landscape architects concerned with clear communication, there are a few topics that could be pursued in future research. Potential exploration into the two forms of literacy that were a focus of this thesis and the layers of designed landscapes are discussed below.

Linking Literacy

The analysis phase of this research inspired the realization that design and visual literacy could be connected in landscape architecture. This link could be further explored in order to help landscape architects use the design process to express legible meaning for their audience. Approaches could be established for professionals that guide design decisions in order to form symbolism that is recognizable for the viewer.

Since societal levels of design literacy are low, landscape architects could learn to focus their process so that the final product they create makes a contribution to visual literacy. Stronger communication could better connect designers to their audience and help to shape public expectations. This means the experiences that designed landscapes facilitate could provide opportunities for education and public understanding of artistic expression in landscape architecture.

Meaning and Motivation

The idea that meaning could be integrated into experience was discussed in this thesis and demonstrated in Appendix C. The illustrated example is just one of many possible ideas that landscape architects could apply to help guide what people read in a landscape. Approaches could be established and evaluated that help people to look for meaning in their motivations for visiting an outdoor space. Research into the layers of designed landscapes could explore how to use functional elements to expose intentional expression of meaning to a landscape architect’s audience.
Final Remarks

Data collection and the analysis of the responses revealed that different groups look at landscapes in different ways. Multiple meanings can be drawn from a landscape architect’s original message based on what each person sees and experiences within a designed landscape. The physical and visual inventory of features may be the same for every viewer, but the thoughts and emotions stimulated by the space can vary significantly.

In some cases, the research indicates that people find what they are looking for in a landscape. As the site interviews suggest, people were seeking out certain experiences, which motivated them to visit the park. These personal reasons, facilitated by the park’s design, became a focus in the visitors’ interpretation of the designers’ intention. Seeing meaning beyond motivation can be difficult for some people, particularly if they had no prior knowledge of the symbolism.

The personality of the viewer may also be an important factor when reading meaning in landscapes. People with more design awareness or interest may look deeper into the way a site is organized and the design elements it incorporates. As the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture students suggested, creative personalities may be more likely to examine the work of other creative people out of curiosity or the desire to learn or to be inspired.

Someone who is more concerned with the practicality of a space may not be aware of the designer’s creativity or interested in their concept. The function, features and experiences that a landscape offers may be more of a focus for this type of personality. Looking for meaning may not be intriguing and the experience is not affected without knowledge of the landscape architect’s message. At a certain point in the communication process, the viewer becomes responsible for acquiring the information necessary to understand the designer’s meaning. In a sense, it is like a conversation where there is give and take in the dialogue. The landscape architect speaks through their design decisions and the viewer can choose to respond by seeking out meaning in their interactions with a designed landscape.

The opportunity for meaningful expression is an exciting element to the profession of
landscape architecture. Designers can create outdoor spaces that are beautiful and provide settings for interaction and enjoyment. By using creativity, landscape architects can intentionally layer meaning with the physical characteristics of a space.

The communication of a message can come with challenges, however, if information is being presented through physical features alone. Designers control how the message is conveyed, but once it released after implementation it is mostly up to the viewer to navigate through the functions and expressions within a space.

Using design decisions effectively could help to shape understanding and raise public design awareness. While landscape architects may be able to present educational opportunities through their work, they might also have to adjust their own expectations of design. The difficulty in controlling perception can also be accepted and embraced so that designers do not have to adjust their symbolism to make it more obvious. Even if everyone is not able to read a designer’s intended meaning, a landscape can still provide beauty and diverse experiences for visitors.
References


Van Assche, Kristof, Martijn Duineveld, Harro De Jong, and Aart Van Zoest. “What Place is this Time? Semiotics and the Analysis of Historical Reference in Landscape Architecture.”


Appendix A: On-Site Interview Questions

Where are you from?

How many times have you been here?

What do you think are the major features of the park?

Design Intent Explanation (Sarah Brown)

The park has been designed to represent layers of meaning:

1. The history of the area is reflected in the way the gardens are organized to follow the lot lines of the row houses that once existed on the site.
2. Also, the gardens are arranged to reflect the Victorian style of collecting.
3. Each of the gardens represents a type of Canadian landscape that can be found in Ontario.

* The maps that depict the layers of meaning are shown to participants at this point.

After learning about the designers’ intention, where do you see aspects of the creative vision?

What do you think the designers were trying to achieve?

What do you appreciate most about the park?

Thank you for your time.
Appendix B: Student Questionnaire

Please fill out the following with your responses:

Where are you from?
What program are you in?
What year are you in?

How familiar are you with the park? (check all that applies)
   A. I have visited the park before.
   B. I have read about it.
   C. I have been taught about the design in class.
   D. I have never been to the park or been taught about it.

What do you think the designers were trying to achieve?
What appears to be unique about the park?
What do you feel are the major features of the park?

*The layers of meaning were shown at this point

What representations do you see of Canadian landscapes?
Is the design intent clear after hearing the explanation?
Do you feel that your design education and experience helps you to read meaning in the landscape? If so, how?
Appendix C

Design Suggestion: Meaning and Experience

During the on-site interviews, the visitors at the Village of Yorkville Park looked at the park through the lens of their own experiences. Without knowing where to look, motivation guided their understanding of intentional meaning. These realizations have inspired suggestions for landscape architects seeking to communicate through their work.

If achieving widespread design literacy is too great a challenge to overcome, why not use interaction to guide interpretation? The functional and visual elements of a space could be used in combination to more strongly convey the message of the designer. The same level of creativity that is used by landscape architects to form their concept, could also be applied if a disconnect in communication needs to be addressed.

If perception does not match intention, opportunities to see and experience the story of a space can be also be designed by landscape architects. This means that the layers of a landscape do not have to be removed from each other. Meaning can be intertwined into the function of a space so that it does not become lost in the practical elements of a site.

The Village of Yorkville Park was used to investigate interpretation of meaning and it has also been used to illustrate how designers can deepen levels of communication. An example has been designed that illustrates how landscape architects can present their audience with the opportunity to interact with their meaning. The proposed idea for landscape architects demonstrates how their ideas could become more legible, without having to change anything physical about their implemented vision. Another layer has been imagined for the Village of Yorkville Park that could help visitors more clearly see the story.

Clarifying Communication: Canada on Cumberland

The Village of Yorkville Park is an example of how a high level of artistic expression can be incorporated into landscape architectural design. The space is beautiful, functional, and
symbolic. The tool for communication that was imagined for this park was therefore designed to emphasize the creativity of the concept. Each representation of Canadian landscape identity has been highlighted in a hypothetical festival titled “Canada on Cumberland.” This event invites local artists to showcase each landscape category within the park through their own artistic ability.

A mural could extend the length of the park so that painters could vertically express their choice of landscape representation based on the horizontal boundary of each section in the park. To make the symbols of the Victorian style of collecting and the organization based on the lot lines more visible, sculptural works could be showcased in large re-creations of collection boxes placed according to the lot lines.

Partnerships with the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Ontario College of Art could help to reach artists and the audience for the event. Three other tools are also recommended in order to help connect and engage with the public. A poster advertisement, as shown on the following page in Figure C-1, has been designed for placement in newspapers, magazines, and in the neighbourhoods surrounding the park. This poster leads people to two social media outlets where they can find further information about the festival and share their own experiences of the event.
Canada on Cumberland

Art Festival Celebrating Canadian Landscapes at the Village of Yorkville Park

Experience artistic interpretations of Canadian landscape identity as seen in Ontario and learn about the symbolism of this iconic park.

07/18/14 - 07/20/14
#seethestory

facebook.com/canadaoncumberland   instagram.com/canadaoncumberland

Figure C-1 Canada on Cumberland Poster Advertisement
Image by author, 2014