

Wisdom Comes out of Serious Experience — Interview with Peter Walker

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Preface...

Peter Walker, who was born in America 1932, is the internationally noted landscape architect and one of the representatives of Minimalism. He has been dedicating himself to the sphere of landscape design and education, drawing on his substantial experience of professional practice and teaching. His landscape architecture projects are almost highly appreciated by the public such as Tanner Fountain in Harvard University, Sony Center in Berlin, as well as National September 11 Memorial at the World Trade Center. Bin Jiang, special editor of *Landscape Architecture China* magazine, had an honored opportunity to profoundly interview with Mr. Walker to further nourish our awareness of his recent experiences and thoughts about landscape architecture.

Bin JIANG (JIANG hereafter): The definition of landscape architecture is becoming vague now and many people claim different definitions for it. Landscape architects need a lot of knowledge and skills to deal with complicated issues, for example, urbanization, social justice, safety of food and water, and other environmental problems. So, what is your opinion about this situation?

Peter WALKER (WALKER hereafter): Well, the first thing you have to remember is that landscape architecture is like architecture. You have an art form that essentially organizes and controls a whole group of experts. If you think about architecture, it is impossible not to think about construction engineering, mechanical engineering, kitchen experts... every kind of expert imaginable. For many years, landscape architects did not have those people who could work with them, but now we do. We have experts in horticulture, experts in irrigation, experts in soil management... whole series of experts. Landscape architects, like architects, cannot know everything about everything. If we did, we would end up knowing nothing about a lot. So landscape architects are now commanding specialists from all over the world. That is getting to be more and more the way we practice, and I think part of it comes from doing very large projects. No single field can command all the technical knowledge necessary for doing these large projects. If landscape architects want to be the leaders of the team, they have to learn to speak the languages of these experts and they have to learn how to use those experts in a fluid and economically efficient way.

JIANG: You mentioned the leadership of landscape architects, but I notice that many disciplines claim they have leadership. For example, architects, even civil engineers, think they can be the leaders of some

projects. So there is a competition for leadership. Normally, I think many people, including many clients, think landscape architecture is just a small part of a project. What is your experience in dealing with this situation — being the leader, coordinating other disciplines, and controlling the big picture?

WALKER: I think there is a mistake in phrasing the question that way because it assumes that leadership is a universal quality. In fact, leadership depends on the applicability of your art, of the expertise you can command. If you are doing a regional study, clearly a landscape architect can lead that effort. If you are doing a water-analysis study, a landscape architect can not lead that kind of thing even if you are using experts. If you are doing a neighborhood, or downtown, or waterfront, the lead will probably go to landscape architect. When you get down to a building, the leadership will shift to an architect. But, even in that situation, there will be area where the landscape architect can take the lead. I think the competition is good. I do not think it is bad. But we should be looking for overlaps.

JIANG: There are many projects that emphasize the creation of functional spaces for citizens. However, many people in contemporary society think that providing functional spaces for citizens should not be the main concern of landscape architecture because we have a lot of problems in dealing with the big scale, such as pollution, over-use of energy, and fragmentation of natural systems. In your opinion, what is a good landscape project these days?

WALKER: It was a Modernist belief that form follows the function. But some modernists started to believe that form control the function — that is, if you build a space in a particular way, people will behave in a

particular way. I believe you need to look at the space sociologically, functionally, but because you can not know all of the uses of a public space, you have to generalize. I think of landscape architecture as a stage on which many plays can be produced. A stage can still be a work of art, but you have to allow for changing uses, uses you did not anticipate. So, for example, I prefer designing a plaza that is relatively open. The same with a lawn or a staircase. I prefer designing the kinds of spaces that allow the human play to go on.

Life changes very rapidly, and landscape has to last for hundreds of years. Buildings also have to last, but public spaces have to be useable for an even longer period of time. This means that, to some extent, the uses are unpredictable. Still, you do not have to design spaces that are empty and boring. Look at Central Park. It is more than a hundred and fifty years old, and it is still as useable today as it was when Frederick Law Olmsted designed it. But it is not used in the same way. That is the key: in designing the form you have to imagine that the uses will change.

JIANG: Many people are concerned with ecological problems. When you do a project, what is your priority? Is it to create a good space for people or, as the first step, to contribute to a sustainable foundation for the nature?

WALKER: Both. You have to deal with both problems. Finally, you have to make a place that serves both interests.

JIANG: I notice people think Minimalism is based on visual languages. Kongjian Yu, my mentor at Peking University, has a very interesting opinion about that. He points out that even if a landscape is visually a mess and yet, from the angle of ecological sustainability,

runs very well and requires very low maintenance and energy usage, then it can be regarded as a simple or Minimal landscape in terms of ecological functions (Xin Wu, 2010).

WALKER: I think that is an academic construction. The fact is landscapes are not just one way or the other. If you are doing a memorial, you do not worry that much about using native plants and how the water drains away because that is not going to be your main concern. Your main concern is to memorialize human events. Your theme is human purpose, and you must serve that purpose because that is what it is about. Still, ecology is an important issue, especially energy use. Even in the United States, we have many more people than we have resources. So right now, I try to make gardens and public spaces that show they have been created in a way that saves energy. It is really important because, like China, we are in a crisis of energy. So I do not contrast art and energy so completely. Remember, I am a practitioner. I make things. I think making theory is important, but theory is separate from practice. Theory is an idea, while practice has to be pragmatic and practical.

JIANG: So you think there is a separation between research and practice?

WALKER: Yes. But all I am saying about visual form and ecology is that it is not one thing or the other. You have to deal with both.

JIANG: In terms of native planting or vernacular landscape, I really think they are suitable for memorials in addition to being ecologically sustainable.

WALKER: Both are logical. But we are not dealing a simple world, I think one of things theory does is to simplify the problem. Remember theory is not proof. Theory is just an idea. Proof comes from building.

JIANG: Currently, there are a few landscape architecture Ph.D. programs in United States universities. I am a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where some people are doing research on how people use spaces and how the spaces influence human behaviors, while other scholars study landscape architecture in cultural and historical contexts. What will you do when facing this issue?

WALKER: Given any problem, I always ask, what is the most important thing here? Maybe an ecological thing? Maybe a sociological thing? Maybe a technical or mechanical thing? You always have to ask yourself what is the most important thing in this particular situation. In some ways, architecture is easier, because the problem is usually defined. In architecture, they will tell you, this is a hospital, or this is a library, or this is a house. They will tell you the basic function. A lot of times in landscape architecture you have to



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4. 澳大利亚悉尼奥林匹克公园
4. Olympic Park, Sydney, Australia

figure that out for yourself, you have to search for the function. We need to put more time into thinking about that, and I think you need to think about it project by project.

JIANG: Is there is a relationship between theory, research, and project?

WALKER: Theory is good because it means people are thinking about problems, but theory is not a recipe for doing.

JIANG: I notice that designers at PWP spend a lot of time doing studies of plants, materials, and scales for different spaces.

WALKER: They call it “practice”. They ask me “What you do about scale?” and I say, “You work on that.”

JIANG: In your book *Landscape Architecture: Defining the Craft*, you said that landscape Architect is a design craft. Other landscape architects claim they are artists or environmentalists or socialists. Is there any conflict between these different claims?

WALKER: Sure, but I am not telling other firms how to do it. I am telling how I do it. *Defining the Craft* is not a book about landscape architecture. It is a book about our office. It is not a theory.

JIANG: Is there any general picture of landscape

architecture? I know in China, generally, people in the field have two different understandings of what landscape architecture is. One group thinks the traditional Chinese garden is the most fundamental thing for contemporary Chinese landscape architecture, and people from the other group, many of whom were educated in the United States and Europe, think landscape architecture is about function and ecological issues and how to provide appropriate spaces for everyday life and common people. (Remember that most traditional Chinese gardens were for the upper-class people.)

WALKER: That is history.

JIANG: Is there a conflict in these two ideas? What are your comments about that?

WALKER: I do not see them as conflicts. I see them as different facets of same problem. The term "landscape" is very broad.

JIANG: From your books *Minimalist Gardens* and *Invisible Gardens*, I can see you have a deep understanding of Minimalism and you used it to create a lot of amazing landscapes. I also can see the influence of the Zen garden on your design philosophy and vocabulary. Zen is the origin of many traditional Chinese and Japanese gardens. Generally, the Zen garden is very simple and peaceful, and the designers

of Zen gardens also tried to create comprehensive meaning in very small spaces. From the angle of visual perception, the Zen garden shares similar characteristics with Minimalist gardens, but they are essentially based on different cultures. My question is how did you integrate them so well in your projects? When you deal with your sites, how do you think about different traditions and then create beautiful and integrative landscapes?

WALKER: You have heard the saying "There is nothing new under the sun"? That is a theory, a broad theory with a practical use. "Nothing new under the sun" suggests history. Why not use the history of form? Forms are like vocabulary. When you write something, you are writing with words. Some of them are really old, and some of them are really new, but you do not just use the new words, you use all the words. And you choose from those words the ones that best convey what you want to say. It is fine to look at forms as the representation of the culture, but if you look at them historically, a lot would be appropriate for other uses, for uses that have nothing to do with culture. Forms are more like vocabulary than ideas. They are pieces to make ideas from, just like vocabulary is what you make writing from.

What you are looking for, above all, is appropriateness. Some of the elements in Zen gardens may be appropriate today, even if the culture would not be. You are not going to go somewhere and create a

Zen garden. But you are going to try for simplicity, classicism. I have stopped using the word "Minimalism" because everybody thinks I just mean Minimal art. What I mean is classicism, a belief that certain forms transcend specific cultures.

JIANG: I know you visited China in 2009. What was your general impression of the urban landscape in China?

WALKER: Well, what I noticed most was the speed. Speed has a lot of aspects. Some of them are good, some of them are bad. The good part is the rapid transformation of the economy and therefore of society. The bad part is building before you really know what you are going to build. Donald Judd used to say, "You should think more before you build." Obviously if you are building fast, and you are building large, there are going to be mistakes. Forget the building for a second. China has looked to the world for what is modern, what is economic, and what is new. And they have found automobiles. Most of the world has too many automobiles and too many roads, and China is going the same way. I understand why people want to move about. It is freedom, a kind of freedom. We went through that phrase in the 1930s and again in 1950s, but cars have ended up being a problem. So I worry that China will not see the problem. I understand the promise, but also I understand the problem.

JIANG: I worked in the Shanghai office of a famous international design firm for three years before I came to the United States. And I felt my patience and passion had been challenged a lot because clients often required us to finish a big project from conceptual design to construction design in a short time, like one month. Many young designers in China really want to make studies and get new ideas and refresh themselves, but unfortunately they cannot do that.

WALKER: China is going to learn these things. You are going to teach them, just like people had to teach us, no difference.

JIANG: The good side of this thing is that young designers get many chances to practice. They can become professionals in a short time even if they do not have time to touch deep things in their projects.

WALKER: If you are being judged, you want the judges to be wise. You do not want them to be young, you do not even want them to be old, and you just want them to be wise. So I just want to become wise. I want to become wise by doing landscape architecture and then trying to figure out what went right and what went wrong. Wisdom comes out of serious experience. Theory may be helpful, but it is not the same as wisdom. You can not read a book that says "Here is how to be wise: point one, point two, point three." You get wise by watching how things work, how things do not work.

JIANG: What has been the most important project in your office during the last ten years? How did it influence your design philosophy or the working process of your studio?

WALKER: I cannot point to a particular project, but there are three kinds of projects that have changed us. The first kind is the industrial area that has to be rebuilt. The Olympic Park in Australia is a good example. The second kind is the urban area created on top of buildings. A good example is Transbay in San Francisco. The third kind is an institution like a university or a hospital or a campus that needs to be physically restructured. In this case we essentially move the cars. The potential landscape spaces of these institutions are parking lots; we move the cars into multi-storied parking garages and then we build humane landscapes where they used to park cars. Examples of this category are the University of Texas and the Cleveland Clinic. All of these projects changed us.

JIANG: What kind of changes?

WALKER: Well, each category had different problems, but a lot of things were the same. When you do things over and over, it allows you to get better, to improve. And it affects the way you look at things.



5. 美国加利福尼亚旧金山交通转换中心屋顶公园景观
5. San Francisco Transbay Roof Park, California, USA

JIANG: Who is the person most influenced your career and your design?

WALKER: I had four mentors. The first one was Lawrence Halprin; working for him was my first job. The second one was Stanley White, who was a teacher at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The third one was Hideo Sasaki, who was my partner and also a teacher. And all through my life, Dan Kiley and I were very close. Although I never worked for him, I watched his work very closely. I thought he was the best.

JIANG: Did they have different influences on you?

WALKER: Sure. Two of them were my teachers. Stanley connected me to the early history of American landscape architecture. He had worked for Olmsted. Sasaki was one of the major theorists of urban redevelopment. He thought that after the war we would have to rebuild our cities. He also invented the kind of firm that we are — a corporate firm with a lot of specialists working together. Larry Halprin was an artist. He taught me to really love the form that comes out of natural things, living things. Kiley was a classicist. He taught me that you should not be easily satisfied. Compare your work to Olmsted's, compare your work to Le Notre's, compare your work to the Zen masters'. Do not pick an easy comparison. Pick the best.

JIANG: You have over fifty years' working experience in your design career. Do you feel it is possible to divide your design career into different phases?

WALKER: Well, when I started, I mostly worked on housing. I was interested in new towns in Europe. I

was trying to build neighborhoods. My goal was to build really nice neighborhoods. Next there was a period of institutions, schools, early campuses. Then, a period of art exploration when I was interested in primary form. Now we are getting all sorts of projects, large projects, larger than anything that came before. Those are stages. If you think about it, they are really stages of a young man, a middle-age man and a mature man.

JIANG: It seems you moved your interest from some things to other things during those stages.

WALKER: Well, it moved for me, I did not move it. When I started, I could only get work in housing. I was interested in other things, but I could only get work in housing. The art thing started when I began to teach, when I finally had enough time to think and study.

JIANG: Can I say you are more interested in art than other things?

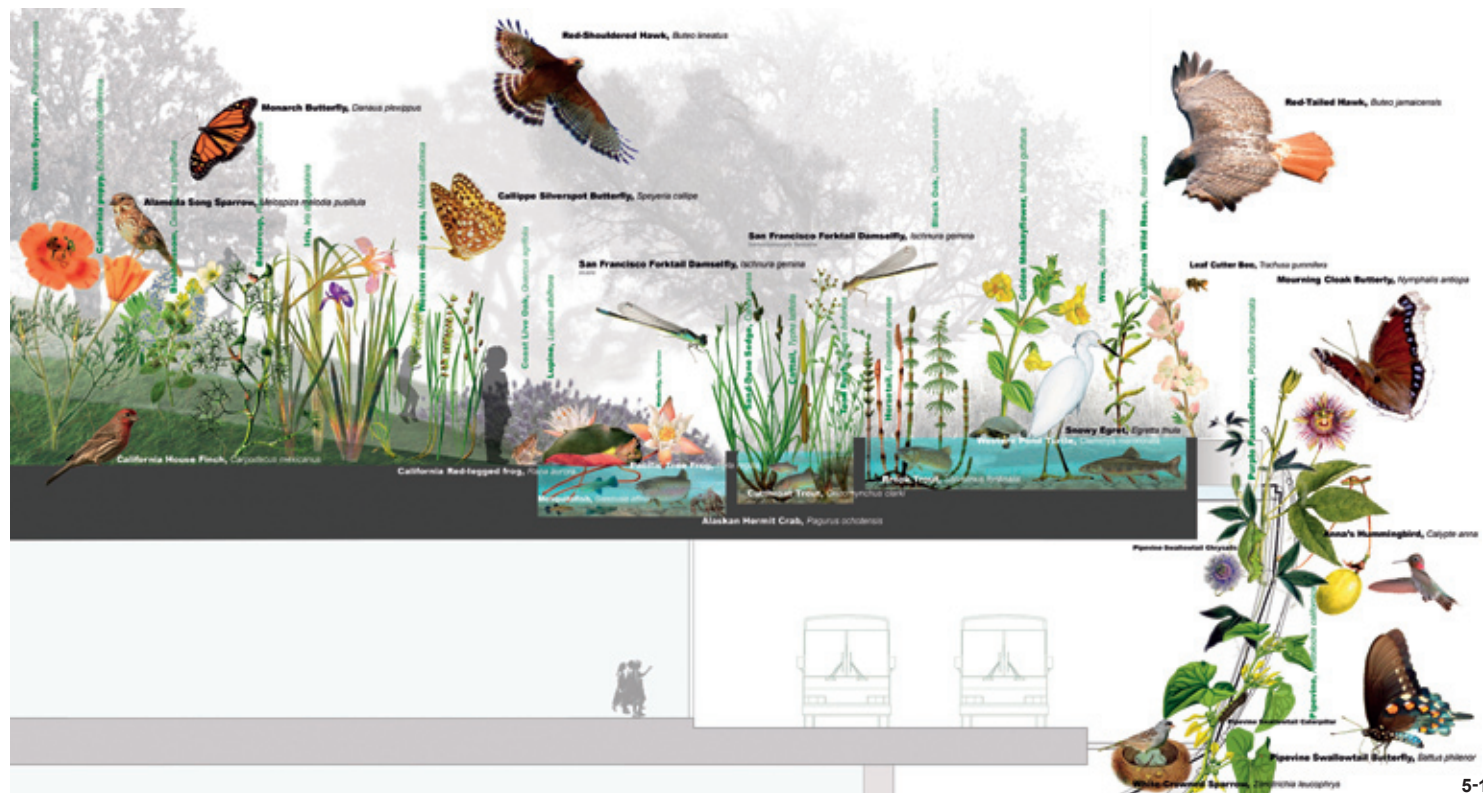
WALKER: I love them all. I do not think one is better than other, I need them all. Finally, I hope I gained some wisdom. Whatever wisdom I have, it comes out of my experience. ■ (Transcribed and Translated by Bin JIANG, Proofread by Mingyan ZHOU)

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