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Emergence in Landscape Architecture

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Emergence in Landscape Architecture
Rod Barnett
London and New York, Routledge, March 2013, viii + 256 pp., $49.95 pb, ISBN 978-0-415-50656-4

Emergence emerges. It emerges as a synthesised, theoretical conglomerate, almost as a living organism within the ecologies and ideas being described. Where other ideas split, *Emergence* integrates; whereas some theories cut, *Emergence* heals. While any philosophy can stand alone, *Emergence* melds. Barnett's treatise-cum-manifesto of a holistic approach to situating a theory of landscape architecture emerges out of and among a combination of disciplines and practices: ecology, field theory, chaos theory, urban planning, and even art and film. Although systematic ecological theories have existed for decades, an explicit treatment applied to landscape architecture is welcomed, especially one as ambitious as Barnett's. *Emergence* helps us rethink what landscape architects do, why/how they do it and what they hope to achieve. This emergentist tactic considers all elements of the world as 'simple existents that are freely interpretable by any person, any animal, anything, since all beings are understood as becoming' (p. 3). Barnett believes simple processes lead to complex systems which are continually involved in and evolve into simpler manifestations of these wholes.

This is a well-illustrated and clearly historically situated volume which poses a possibility for a reconciliation and articulation of styles, languages and interpretations of landscape design. Barnett is concerned with how the human–human and human–nonhuman interfaces evolve and how these symbioses can develop specifically through his theory of emergence in landscape architecture. The format—a textbook which reads like a theoretical proclamation—should appeal to art and architectural historians, landscape architects, planners and other landscape practitioners both theoretically and for teaching purposes.

Seven chapters comprise *Emergence*. 'Narratives' explicates the philosophical and ecological underpinnings of irreducibility, supervenience, downward causation, unpredictability, and novelty and their *irreducible* connection to the nonlinear emergence of urban landscapes. 'Key concepts' incites thought of open systems, methods through which knowledge structures are considered value based, inchoative and nonstatic. The amalgam of *Emergence's* narratives and key concepts chart out how the scientific and ecological stratagems can be practically bridged and explored through embodiment and representation exemplified in the chapters 'Projects and practices' and 'Encounters'. The concepts of open systems, situation, meridian, assemblage, naturecultures, field theory, morphogenesis, difference and disturbance drive Barnett's position on/of landscape architecture and encompass a speculative series of urban(e)–rural/natural–cultural possibilities made built. From a New Zealand vegetation regeneration project(ion) named *Birdscape* through a plaza in Montevideo to Teardrop Park in New York City, a landscape inspired and derived abstract picture emerges in actual pictures: emergence theory assimilates, absorbs and admits, rather than being segregating and isolating. So much so that what may appear a disparate jump from the practical and realised landscape architecture projects in 'Projects and practices' to philosophical 'Encounters' in the next chapter is almost to be expected in this multifarious exposé. Lofty portrayals of the body and the carnal, romance, hallowed order and the

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(Grecian) sacred grove lead the reader through a thesis relating the eighteenth-century French pleasure garden painting via the viaduct of noir ('landscapes of noir' and 'operations of noir') into film criticism. Initially, this chapter jolts within the book's chapter mix but a harmonisation of these more 'fringey' topics within the work's compass is met before chapter's end. It is here Barnett would have lost most of his more conservative audience while the fervent free thinker remains gleefully strapped in waiting for more. Here lies *Emergence's* most obvious strength and concomitant failing: eclecticism spreads the conceptual and fulfilled landscape architectural net wide which is exciting and challenging. However, at times, the net falls thinly, too thinly one could argue to warrant a major theoretical shift in the stodginess of the discipline. Still, Barnett duly acknowledges his encounters 'trace the barest outline of an approach' (p. 199); where some may consider many of the broached subjects and praxes are not at all relevant to or not even of peripheral significance to landscape architecture and landscape research. However, Barnett can most certainly be forgiven for venturing such a bold yet friendly and inviting provocation and polemic against this conservatism.

It is in 'Propositions' and 'Conclusion' where some pent-up tension is finally relieved. As manifesto-esque as *Emergence* presents, the author is flexible and honest. An emergentist strategy and practitioner can embrace former ways, but these older ways do not necessarily include and meld emergentist means. *Emergence* is adaptable, seizing modern and willing-to-compromise bottom–up and top–down explanations and explananda, while not deriding or discarding traditional studies, applications and realities of the built landscape. The result is a mission statement whose purport falls way beyond the *prima facie* ambit of landscape architecture into a philosophical and existential re-examination of the role and emplacement of humans within natural, urban, cultural and built ecologies. This is certainly to be commended. Barnett has compiled a canonic platform upon which future creativity within and into emergentist paradigms can be launched. Some viable philosophical destinations are anticipated, as are pertinent methods with which to arrive at these ports of call. However, I suspect, and I am sure Barnett would concur, when we arrive at our termini, wherever these may be, we must be already primed to employ a different tactic in order for *Emergence* to persist and thrive and change, with or without us.

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