Gunn on Research is “Mandatory Reading”

To The Editor:

Bravo to Clare Gunn for his thorough and timely endorsement of research in landscape architecture. Copies of his report (LA Sept. '78) should be mandatory reading for department chairmen, deans, and presidents of universities with established or developing landscape architecture programs. As an academic landscape architect with a research contract, I have been conducting scientific, hypothesis-testing research in landscape architecture for six years. Along with colleagues having similar research commitments, I have become accustomed to the vacuum of understanding among university administrations, promotion committees, granting agencies, and academic journals as to the methodology and relevancy of landscape architecture research. Due to the established tradition of promotion by publication of research on our respective campuses, most of us have had to publish our work in journals of allied professions and academic disciplines. Although LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE Magazine has done its best to publish research results, it does not constitute a true “peer-reviewed” journal, so we are penalized if we publish in it rather than in allied, refereed journals which, of course, few landscape architects read. We are sorely in need of a better forum for our research results.

Regardless of where research results are published, there is still the problem, as Dr. Gunn mentioned, of acceptance of the necessity of research by practicing professionals. The Fein report of several years ago pointed out that we are sometimes a cautious profession, preferring to defend present turf rather than expand boundaries. It may indeed be extremely difficult for practicing landscape architects whose finely-tuned, practical problem-solving skills may color their perceptions of the usefulness of research conducted by hypothesis-testing landscape architects. Fortunately at this point, most research landscape architects have first been trained in the “landscape architecture-as-intuitive-art” tradition, and have considerable sympathy toward practitioners. Many, like myself, feel obligated to continue a small amount of professional practice to maintain that sympathy. However, if the training of research scientist-landscape architects totally displaces traditional design education (the primary criticism of graduate landscape architecture programs), then future research landscape architects will find more and more difficulty communicating with their counterparts in practice.

The solution to this process is threefold. First, we need better understanding, training and communication between research landscape architects. A journal would help tremendously here. Second, we need curriculum development in landscape architecture research which is sensitive to the common, accepted, largely intuitive manner of professional practice; nothing will ever totally replace the landscape architect’s intuition in the solution of land use problems. Third, the excellent job now being done by LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE Magazine in reporting both research and practice must be continued, academic journal or none.

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Technical articles which explore new concepts and/or report on the development of scientific advances are occasionally circulated by the editor of LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE for peer review. But by no means is peer review a fixed requisite for having one’s manuscript published here — as it may be in other exclusively technical journals, many of them heavily subsidized by universities, foundations or learned societies — and read, as Professor Thayer says — by few landscape architects.

As for the assertion that authors who appear in these pages are thereby “penalized,” I doubt it is a significant practice. Any such penalties could only come from perverted attempts to monopolize scholarly output and to force it into impenetrable prose suitable only for a small hierarchy of approved journals.

But there is certainly a need for increased publication of the results of research in landscape architecture. And I am glad that LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE has been one of the few publications of wider circulation open to such reports. For this is the only major magazine in the Western hemisphere which is intently read not only by scholars in teaching and research, but by the entire body of practitioners of landscape architecture. It is a unique bridge between research and practice. We will continue our efforts to speed up the interchange among those concerned with research and theory, and those who translate theory into landscape reality. That is, we continue to solicit and select the best work and thought that is available.

As to the difficulties of communication between researchers and practitioners, the Landscape Institute (of Great Britain) is well into the expansion of its membership to include scientists as well as landscape managers. By encouraging scientists to become members of the profession, the Institute aims to sharpen their abilities to speak each other’s language and to function as members of multi-disciplinary teams. This example has not been followed, so far as we can learn, by any professional planning/design professional group in the United States. We will watch its progress and publish a report on it in 1979.

Meanwhile, Landscape Research is being published by the Landscape Research Group, Landscape Studies, Department of Town and Country Planning, University of Manchester, England M13 9PL. Its latest issue is guest-edited by Professor Ervin Zube of the University of Arizona, an American landscape architect whose writings are familiar to readers of this journal. Its breadth of coverage suggests that it has a promising future as a means of international communication. Correspondence should be addressed to Professor Ian Laurie, Honorary Editor, at the above address. [Ed.]

The Angry Buzzing Over Women at Harvard

To The Editor:

I enjoyed Dorothy May Anderson’s contribution on the Cambridge School (LA March ’78) right up to the end. But her last paragraph almost undid the rest of her good effort.

Here is her last paragraph, in full: “The Cambridge School was closed in 1942 when Harvard opened its doors to women. It had come to full circle from the days of a few far-sighted Harvard
alternate sites. Then he announced that Clarke had won!

The second example is recorded by Prof. Norman Newton, FASLA, who recalls that he, then a major in the Army, was the first American officer to enter Monte Cassino Abbey after the terrible bombing and battle that took place there. He made a report on the amount of damage to the abbey and the possibilities for its reconstruction, which appeared the next day in all the American newspapers. At that time he was senior monuments officer of the British 8th Army and accompanied it in the Italian campaign to do what he could to protect and preserve the monuments and Fine Arts of Italy.

I wonder whether a comprehensive effort to record World War II activities of landscape architects can be effected before time and death have obliterated the record?

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Undergraduate Education — Twenty Years Out of Date

To The Editor:

The tandem discussions of graduate education and research by John Lyle and Clare Gunn (LA Sept. '78) must direct our attention to a reciprocal question. If this expansion and sophistication of landscape architecture at the graduate level is potentially "leading" the profession, might we view present undergraduate education as "lagging"? Is there a disparity between the broad focus of graduate research and the often confined definition of undergraduate education? Should there be?

The diverse wealth and orientation of contemporary graduate education as explained by Lyle and Gunn is reflected in themes at the 1978 ASLA Annual Meeting. There seems to be a consensus that balance between theory and application, national and local issues, and the site scale and the regional scale is necessary for a healthy evolution of the profession. Balance and continued evolution are hallmarks of any profession's development. And there the rub begins.

Whereas research and application techniques have advanced at the graduate level, undergraduate education many times continues to dwell on a narrow spectrum of landscape architecture using skills 20 years out of date. In addition, we are on the verge of further degrading our position with the recent concentration on the Uniform National Examination as the mandatory content of Accredited Programs in Landscape Architecture.

This phenomenon is not new. Planning was successfully ostracized earlier this century through a conservative introversion within the profession. The issue today, however, goes beyond defining what is or is not proper landscape architecture in firm professional standing or extending into the recognized occupational process of deprofessionalization. Professionalism offers landscape architecture cultural advantages necessary to fulfill its broad role in today's society. But, if landscape architecture is to have routine execution replace unique design response, then its professional position in the community has been impaired. Concentrations and specializations are common developments within professions. But must one deny another?

The issue of conventional technical competence in undergraduates has been brewing for several years. In this respect there seems to be a paradox between the goals of the profession and the goals of the established profession. As a member of the profession, a landscape architect desires education to advance the ethical content and ability of the profession. As a practicing professional, the same person wants education to provide skilled graduates to perform specific functions within their organization: Is there a priority? Are they both attainable? Where must the emphasis lie for the future development of landscape architecture as a profession?

If conservative regulation of accredited programs takes hold, educational programs will continue to lag the profession. For a needed knowledge or skill to be recognized as valid curriculum it would first occur in the form of a need in the practice of landscape architecture. The process would then require changes in registration law for a multitude of states. If this could be accomplished, the Uniform National Exam could then be altered to reflect the new content. At this point accredited educational programs must include the new content in their instruction. The process would inherently take years if it could function at all. The conclusion is that tying professional education to any specific content and expecting it to provide on-line capabilities is impossible. This serves neither the professional nor the profession.

There is, as John Lyle suggests, an ecology of the profession of landscape architecture. Its ability to prosper is only enhanced by diversity at both the graduate and undergraduate levels of education. Diversity is a primary quality of American higher education and is compatible with the concept of professional education in landscape architecture.

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"Less is More"
On the River James

To The Editor:

Re: "A Concept for the James River in Richmond" (LA Sept. '78)

As long as I can remember landscape architects have been blessed with the ability to solve unusual problems in the environment with a sensitivity and uniqueness that is absent in related professions. Being somewhat familiar with, and very interested in, river parks and flood plain development, I realize that Angela Danadjieva's solution to the James River park has been well thought out and although it appears to be very simple, actually, it is not. The concept follows an old design principle of Mies van der Rohe's, "Less is More": more is gained than lost by simplicity and purity.

A designer is severely limited as far as the selection of activities which may be used in a flood plain. Therefore one must do nothing, except remove unsightly or dangerous elements and provide access to and from the city.

Not all cities are as fortunate as Richmond to have a natural amenity such as the James River. Although many rivers run through large cities, not many parks are linked to those rivers. I congratulate the firm of Danadjieva and Koenig Associates for their insight into the natural processes and their ability to work with them and not around them.