Landscape in the Middle East: an inquiry

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ABSTRACT This inquiry was instigated by recent efforts to establish landscape architecture in the Middle East. The absence of a word corresponding to ‘landscape’ in Arabic is contributing to an ambiguity as to the meaning of the English word in the design professions as well as in the general use of the word. The development of ‘landscape’ as a cultural concept that originated in Europe is reviewed and the ways in which the complexity of accumulated meanings has influenced the development of landscape architecture in the West are examined. It is against this historical background that the absence of an Arabic word is explained, the undesirability of direct translation discussed and the need to search for a contextualized concept of ‘landscape’ argued.

KEY WORDS: Arabic, environment, landscape, landscape architecture, Middle East.

The Changing Perspectives of Landscape

‘Landscape’ derives from the Dutch word Lantscap, which is rooted in the common Germanic land and the suffix -schap meaning ‘constitution, condition’ (Makhzoumi & Pungetti, 1999). This earthbound Dutch expression has come to acquire several meanings. These meanings can be classified under four broad, mutually inclusive perspectives: landscape as scenery; landscape as a specific place; landscape as an expression of culture; and landscape as a holistic entity (Makhzoumi & Pungetti, 1999). The multiplicity of meanings, argues Meinig (1976), derive from the word’s attractiveness, in view of its associations with nature and outdoor scenery, its importance, because it involves matters of professional interest and of public concern, and its ambiguity, because it is used by different people for a variety of purposes.

One of the earliest meanings of the English word ‘landscape’ is scenery. It was during the 17th and 18th centuries that landscape, in itself, was becoming the subject of painting. Realistic depiction of nature by 17th-century Dutch painters idealized classical and pastoral scenes, and visionary panoramas established a genre of painting that continues to influence contemporary public understanding of the word ‘landscape’. As a result, it is not uncommon for ‘nature’, ‘scenery’ and ‘landscape’ to be used interchangeably.

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The perspective of landscape as scenery has come to be adopted by the visual arts (Andrews, 1999), philosophy (Kemal & Gaskell, 1993) and the public at large. People are interested in landscapes predominantly for the pleasure of viewing and experiencing them. Public interest, in addition, is intertwined with the historical associations of landscape as a symbol of cultural and national identity (Matless, 1998; Olwig, 1993).

The meaning of landscape as a specific place has its origins in the early-19th-century German school of geography. The German equivalent for region, landschaft, is, in fact, ‘landscape’. Unlike the scenic, painterly appreciation of landscape, this perspective was concerned with the distinguishing physical characteristics of a geographic, spatial entity. Since the 1960s, however, geographers’ interest in the landscape has broadened to embrace perceptual and aesthetic values (Appleton, 1986; Cosgrove, 1998), group and individual identity (Dijkink, 1996), as well as landscape as ‘place’ (Adams et al., 2001; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1995). The interplay of ‘place’ and ‘space’ is the key to understanding the idea of landscape (Olwig, 2001). ‘Place’ is idiosyncratic and subjective and takes into account the experiential meaning of ‘lived-in’ landscapes, while ‘space’ represents the analytic view of a positivistic geography and tends to objectify and impersonalize landscape.

Landscape as an expression of culture is in many ways an extension of this perspective. It can be traced to the concept of cultural landscapes, a term first introduced by the American geographer Carl Sauer (1925) to describe landscapes fashioned out of the natural environment by a society in a specific place and time, the sense of time and social continuity being an important aspect for identifying the heritage values. This third perspective became the focus of a particular tradition in cultural geography, which viewed landscape as a product of cumulative cultural modifications over the entire history of a region (Hoskins, 1985) and as an expression of vernacular culture (Jackson, 1984).

More recently, attempts have been made to reinterpret the formal (aesthetic), the physical (geographical), the material (cultural remains) and the historical meanings of landscape in the context of post-modern thinking. James Duncan’s notion of landscape as text (Duncan, 1990) and Denis Cosgrove’s landscape as a way of seeing (Cosgrove, 1998) are examples that aim to study historical and contemporary landscapes “in relation to both structured political practices and individual intentions” (Duncan, 1990, p. 5). For Duncan, the starting point is to see landscape as a communicative device that encodes and transmits information and, as such, can be read and interpreted as text (Duncan & Duncan, 1988). This makes it possible to investigate how landscapes encode information and the role they play in the constitution of social and political practices. Landscape as a way of seeing is based on the historical appropriation of land by select social groups as a means of identifying themselves, their relations with the land and other human groups. Cosgrove’s interpretation allows historical explanations to remain powerful, while embracing a broadly critical analysis of the role played by landscape ideas in the expression and maintenance of social power. Anthropologists and archaeologists have offered interpretations of ‘landscape’ along similar lines. Investigating the meaning of land and landscape historically, among non-European and pre-modern European cultures, they have come to question the Western understanding of landscape as a perceived view (Bender, 1993; Tilley, 1994). They argue that the meaning of “landscape” should be “contextualized”, because “the way in which people—anywhere, every-
Landscape Architecture: from the pictorial to the holistic

The design professions (e.g. landscape architecture, architecture and urban design) can be seen as representing yet another perspective on landscape. Whether consciously or not, designers have, throughout history, appropriated landscapes in the process of accommodating the needs and requirements of society. They deal with landscape both as a physical reality and as a conceptual and artistic construct, their skills being equally footed in the sciences and the arts. As such, the nature of their work integrates the visual, the geographical, the cultural and the holistic perspectives of landscape discussed above (Figure 1).

As an established profession, landscape architecture is 100 years old. However, the conceptual and aesthetic foundation of contemporary landscape architecture is much older, and firmly rooted in the Renaissance. It was in the Renaissance that new ways of viewing, experiencing and re-creating landscapes shifted the focus of design from the enclosed, walled gardens of monasteries and palaces towards the outlying landscape and distant horizons (Steenbergen & Reh, 1996). The sating of the Italian Renaissance villa and its emphasis on a controlling view of the surrounding countryside exemplified these developments. A prioritizing of the scenic and visual dimension of landscape gradually became the focus of landscape design. Spreading from Italy to Europe, the outward gaze and grand design scale reached a zenith in French formal landscapes, where the geometrically ordered garden layout, as at Versailles, dwarfed the palace in scale and provided a vista that stretched to the horizon (Figure 2). Encompassing scenic views of the surrounding countryside were equally important in 18th-century English landscaping, albeit as naturalistic parklands (Figure 3).

Designing these large-scale landscapes involved a manipulation of terrain, the damming of streams and the mass arrangement of planting, which was not possible without a unified will and an integrated vision of monarch or landed gentry, in France or England respectively. As the wider countryside was appropriated by the privileged few, landscape became a means of expressing power and signifying control (Williams, 1973). This was reflected not only in a strictly formal ordering of landscape, but also in the fact that visual appreciation was exclusive to the point from which the seeing occurred, i.e. that of the owner.
Figure 1. The accumulated meanings of ‘landscape’ and the environmental design professions.

Figure 2. Versailles. Water features and the geometrically ordered gardens create a visual perspective that extends up to the horizon.
The Western meaning of ‘landscape’ was shaped in the context of this scenic, elitist ‘viewpoint’ (Bender, 1993).

Landscape design concepts that developed in 18th- and 19th-century Europe played a pivotal role not only in shaping the contemporary meaning of the word ‘landscape’, but also in influencing landscape architecture, especially in the profession’s formative years. The repercussions were twofold. On the one hand, they narrowed the landscape designer’s role to a replication of the naturalistic landscape park. On the other hand, they influenced public expectations of the landscape profession towards the scenic and pictorial.

By the 1960s and 1970s, a new environmental consciousness, supported by ecology, afforded an alternative appreciation of nature and landscape. Many landscape architects, aware of the need to broaden the scope of the profession, believed that a better understanding of ecology emancipated landscape architects from arbitrary design and the prevailing preoccupation with formalistic, visual aspects of landscape (McHarg, 1967, 1969). In the decades that followed, ecological landscape design came to embrace a holistic, dynamic appreciation of landscape rather than a strictly visual one (Beer, 1990; Lyle, 1985; Makhzoumi & Pungetti, 1999; Selman, 1981; Thompson & Steiner, 1997). Within this holistic framework, landscape design solutions are responsive to the environmental, ecological and aesthetic dictates of the region. As such, they are sustainable, appropriate and enhance the character of place and region.

Landscape architecture today embraces a diversity of schools and approaches, with the ecological approach at one end and the strictly formalistic one at the other. The majority of commercial landscapes the world over, however, fall into the latter category.
A Signifying Absence and the Problems of Translation

There is as yet no word for ‘landscape’ in Arabic. Available translations are generally restricted and outdated because they adopt the 18th-century English, scenic meaning. The Arabic translation of ‘landscape’ is variously given as ‘natural scenery’ (Theodory, 1996), ‘land scenery’ (Baalbaki & Baalbaki, 1997; Nasr & Khatib, 1985) and ‘view of the countryside’ (Saadeh, 1996).

The Arabic translation of ‘landscape architecture’ is either omitted altogether (Baalbaki & Baalbaki, 1997; Karmi, 1987b; Wahba, 2000) or, where provided, continues to emphasize the aesthetic and scenic role of the profession (Karmi, 1987a). In contrast, the Arabic translation for ‘landscape gardening’ is consistent in most English–Arabic translations because of the availability of an Arabic word for ‘gardening’, bastana, which is also the word for horticulture.

Shortcomings of the Arabic translations can be attributed in part to the complexity of the English word, which makes it impossible to combine the different meanings into a single translation. However, the main shortcoming is due to the difficulties inherent in transferring a complex concept, such as ‘landscape’, from one socio-cultural context to another. Direct translation of the English word ‘landscape’ may intentionally or inadvertently superimpose ideas and conceptions that are alien to the context of the Middle East. An extreme case in point is Orientalism, a European invention that served as a way of coming to terms with the Orient ( Said, 1985). Orientalism, like landscape, is “an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary” that expresses a certain will or intention to understand, and in some cases to control and manipulate the world ( Said, 1985, p. 5). This reading of the total landscape of the Middle East was used not only to dominate a place and culture (Duncan & Duncan, 1988) but also, as argued by Said, to displace “Oriental history as a history possessing its own coherence, identity and sense”, identifying it instead “directly and immediately with world history, a euphemism for European history” (1985, p. 86). An inquiry into ‘landscape’ should be firmly situated in the historical and socio-cultural context of the Middle East and in no way transferred and imposed from a Western one.

Neither can the absence of an Arabic word for ‘landscape’ be attributed to linguistic shortcomings. Arabic is a rich language that “not only has the precision which makes it an excellent instrument for scientific discourse but also the inner dimension which enables it to be the perfect vehicle for the expression of the most esoteric forms of knowledge” (Nasr, 1978, p. 8). The absence of an Arabic word is more likely to be due to cultural differences between a Middle Eastern conception of ‘landscape’ and a Western one.

‘Landscape’ in the Middle East: contextualizing the concept

A contextualized concept implies situating ‘landscape’ within the geographical, environmental, cultural and political framework of the Middle East. Here, ‘landscape’ can be defined in two different ways: as a physical entity, a piece of the Earth’s surface and its system of living, non-living and human components; and as a social and cultural construction, signifying the way in which people engage with their world in a specific time and place. These two definitions are closely related. Socio-cultural interpretations are rooted in, and historically evolve from, the geographical reality of region, and, in turn, alter and shape the
physical setting. It is contended here that this reciprocal relationship has been severed, as social, economic and political changes in the contemporary Middle East transform culture and landscape alike.

Years of colonial domination and recent integration into global systems have contributed to the collapse of traditional social structures and cultural values (Barakat, 1993). The transitional nature of contemporary Arab society is echoed by transformations in the physical landscape. Twentieth-century population increase is changing the regional landscape by replacing traditional, vernacular patterns, both rural and urban, with homogeneous, contemporary ones.

An inquiry into the meaning of ‘landscape’ can proceed by simultaneously deconstructing the multi-layered meaning of ‘landscape’, and thereafter attempting to reconstruct a new, holistic conception that is rooted in the changing physical and cultural context of the region. The remainder of this paper will explore selected references that have the potential to contribute to a Middle Eastern conception of ‘landscape’. The perspectives of landscape, discussed earlier, will be used as an exploratory and ordering framework.

Landscape as a Specific Place and as an Expression of Culture

The physical landscape of the Middle East is extremely heterogeneous. Mountain ranges, seas and rivers provide the framework for a rich mosaic of sub-regions with a variety of soil, plant cover and microclimates. However, the struggle against aridity has, over the centuries, influenced social and political organization and shaped religious and cultural values.

The duality in Middle Eastern mythological narratives between, on the one hand, the ordered, inhabited space of settlement and cultivated land and, on the other, the dangerous, unknown world of chaos, embodies the unending struggle against aridity. Mot, the god of sterility and drought, represented the world of chaos and exemplified cultural values shaped by a desert environment (Eliade, 1991).

Aridity has similarly influenced the management of natural resources under Islamic Law (Dutton, 1992). As an example, there are two categories of land, amir (developed), and mawat (‘dead’ or undeveloped land), with a third category, harim (protective zones), that represents the interface of the two. Mawat, from the Arabic root mawt (death), shares a common root with the Semitic Mot, the god of chaos, sterility and drought. Ilhya al mawat (making life flourish in dead lands) has always been a central value in Arab–Islamic culture (Llewellyn, 1992).

The design of urban landscapes and gardens in Arab–Islamic culture was similarly guided by the dictates of aridity. The need to provide shade and to conserve water meant that urban open spaces and gardens were sheltered and enclosed. Alhambra in Moorish Spain, the planning of Safavid Esfahan and the palace gardens of Moghul, India, are historic examples of Islamic landscape design (Figure 4).

Muslim designers’ conception of gardens as ‘earthly paradises’ (Lehrman, 1980) echoes the duality expressed in mythological narratives. The description of ‘paradise’ in the Koran is best appreciated in the context of the arid regional setting. In fact, jenna (Arabic for paradise) is also the word for garden. It is at once a physical place that is cool and shaded, with abundant fruit trees, scented
Figure 4. The sheltered gardens of Alhambra, Spain, exemplify landscape design principles that are responsive to the climatic dictates and make efficient use of natural resources.

flowers and flowing water, and a conceptual space, a state of peace and contentment (Figure 5).

Landscape as a Way of Seeing and as Text

The contemporary Western way of seeing landscape as a view of the countryside is alien to the cultures of the Middle East for several reasons. In the hostile environment of the Middle East, comfort and security and, by association, beauty, are embodied by landscapes that are human-modified and human-made, the agrarian landscape and the urban one respectively. It is understandable, therefore, that the focus of aesthetic appreciation is not the outlying landscape of hills and forests, but a cultural one, in which nature has been ‘tamed’,
Figure 5. Sixteenth-century Islamic miniature of a walled garden that is shaded, with abundant fruit trees and flowing water (Redrawn from British Library miniature Or. 3714, f. 295a (Titley & Wood, 1991)).
enclosed and ordered. The ‘outward movement’ of perceiving ‘landscape’ as a scene that reaches its end in the horizon, is inevitably ‘introverted’ in the Middle East. Nor is ‘horizon’ as important a feature of landscape as it is in Western culture. Accordingly, the aesthetic meaning of ‘landscape’ in the Middle East is fundamentally different, physically, perceptually and symbolically, from the scenic, ‘extrovert’ historical and contemporary meaning of the word for people in the West (Figure 6).

A Middle Eastern concept of ‘landscape’ is experiential. It is appreciated bit by bit, through movement in space and time and an engagement of all the senses. As such, it cannot be perceived in one ‘glance’, nor can it be appreciated through the Westerner’s distanced gaze. This explains the confused spatial perception experienced by European travellers to the Middle East during the 19th century. Timothy Mitchell (1988) traces the confusion to the difficulty encountered in ‘forming a picture’: in other words, failing “to gain the requisite distance and recoil[ing] at the proximity, detail and movement of the lived experience” (Bender, 1993, p. 1).

Political empowerment, the struggle for control and the gendering of space in cities are similarly not visible at a glance as they are in the European historical setting. Rather, they are often encoded into the labyrinthine morphology of residential quarters, palace complexes and the urban movement network. The apparently simple, organic configuration of the Middle Eastern courtyard house, for example, succeeds in ordering complex social relationships between the inhabitants and their visitors and in overcoming gender inequalities (Zako, 2000).
Landscape as a Holistic Entity

The Middle East is one of the world’s oldest continually inhabited regions. Natural and cultural processes have transformed forests, hills and plains into managed and modified landscapes. Traditional vernacular landscapes exemplify such modifications and represent successful ways in which indigenous societies have, over centuries, accommodated their needs for shelter and production through the efficient utilization of natural resources. Middle Eastern vernacular landscapes exemplify the meaning of landscape as a holistic entity, because they are responsive to the geographic, environmental and cultural context. The responsiveness to the region’s characteristic heterogeneity has meant that they too are diverse, having adapted to hilly terrains, river valleys and deserts (Figure 7). Aesthetically too, vernacular landscapes possess a distinctiveness that derives from and, in turn, contributes to the sense of place and region. As such, they have the potential to inspire landscape architects in the Middle East in their search for sustainable and holistic design approaches (Makhzoumi, 2001).

In combination, the references discussed above reflect a way of experiencing, reading and appropriating the landscape that is intrinsically Middle Eastern. And because these references situate the inquiry within the cultural context of the Middle East, they allow for an understanding of ‘landscape’ on its own terms, not by judging it against Western preconceptions.

Landscape Architecture in the Middle East: a profession in the making

The profession of landscape architecture is new to the Arab Middle East. There are only a handful of practising landscape architects, their numbers negligible in comparison to the number of practising architects. Academically, too, programmes offering undergraduate degrees in landscape design have only recently been established. There is, however, growing awareness of the professional gap and recognition that landscape architecture has the potential to enhance the urban environment and improve the quality of life.

Efforts to establish landscape architecture in the Middle East are hindered by, among other obstacles, misinformation regarding the professional scope and ambiguity surrounding the meaning of the English word. Landscape design is not uncommonly confused with garden design and horticulture, its potential narrowed down to a ‘beautification’ through the use of ornamental plants. Establishing the professional title, with no Arabic word corresponding to ‘landscape’, is in itself an obstacle.

In the absence of an Arabic word for ‘landscape’, an array of terms has come to be used. The most common of these are hada’ik (gardens), fadha’at kharijia (outdoor spaces) and bi’a (environment), which may connote one or more meanings of ‘landscape’ as discussed earlier. With the addition of tasmim (design), these terms are alternatively used to refer to professional qualifications in landscape architecture. ‘Environment’ is by far the closest Arabic term presently in use that corresponds to landscape. The two terms are not uncommonly interchangeable; they are equally applied to rural and urban contexts and similarly refer to natural and cultural settings. Environment, however, implies the world that surrounds us, the biosphere that sustains us, whereas landscape indicates a panorama in front of us, one that is culturally perceived as defined
Vernacular rural landscapes exemplify the holistic meaning of landscape: (a) A town in the Upper Euphrates valley (Makhzoumi, 2001) and (b) a desert oasis.

by our vision and interpreted by our minds (Meinig, 1976). Furthermore, since the 1960s and 1970s, ‘environment’ has been increasingly used too in association with problems of air and water pollution and solid-waste management. This has denied environment the rich array of cultural associations that landscape has come to possess. In short, ‘environment’, although complementary, cannot serve as a substitute for the word ‘landscape’.
Ambiguity concerning the meaning of ‘landscape’ on the one hand, and a restricted, outdated Arabic translation on the other, have meant that landscape architects and architects, whether intentionally or inadvertently, have come to rely on the Western meaning of ‘landscape’ with all its biases and shortcomings. The fact that landscape architecture was introduced to the Middle East, as elsewhere in the developing world, by modern architecture has in turn encouraged the adoption of a Western conception of ‘landscape’. Preoccupation with the visual, with superficial form, rather than content and context,\(^6\) has come to limit the professional scope to the provision of ornamental plants and large areas of turf grass that serve as a backdrop to the buildings, much in the fashion of the modern architecture in Europe and North America. Moreover, replicating a typically Western, intellectually and physically distanced visual perception inevitably excludes an experiential appreciation of ‘landscape’, one that engages all the senses. Prioritizing the visual rather than the experiential, in addition, restricts the potential of landscape design as a tool for exploration and creativity and denudes the landscape of its symbolism and sacredness (Howett, 1987).

Above all, embracing a formalistic and strictly visual meaning of landscape implies a disregard for the environmental and ecological context of the Middle East. The new landscape, in cities and the urban footprint, threatens ecological stability, undermines long-term environmental sustainability and erodes the regional landscape character (Figure 8). And while there are local initiatives that aim to move away from a copying of Western architecture, such a regional approach\(^7\) is yet to be introduced in landscape architecture. Until such a time, it will be difficult for landscape designers to address the more serious problems of maintaining the heterogeneity of the regional landscape and of re-creating sustainable future landscapes.

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\(^6\) Superficial: surface-level, overly simplistic, or not addressing the deeper aspects of the subject.

\(^7\) Regional approach: a strategy that focuses on the specific characteristics and needs of a particular region, rather than adopting a global or universal model.
Conclusion

The absence of a word that corresponds to ‘landscape’ in the Middle East does not negate the presence of a local understanding of landscape. It only means that such an understanding would have developed from different ways of seeing, appropriating and using the land. The search for an Arabic word, therefore, cannot be undertaken independently, but should proceed in parallel with an inquiry into the meaning of ‘landscape’ in the physical and cultural context of the Arab Middle East.

Broadening the professional scope beyond current formalistic restrictions, in turn, depends on establishing a Middle Eastern conception of ‘landscape’. This, however, is a complex undertaking, not only because of the problems associated with a physical and cultural landscape that is itself evolving, but also because of the interdisciplinary nature of such an undertaking.

Inquiring into the concept of primordial landscape in ancient and traditional cosmologies, exploring the perception of land, environment and natural resources in religion and vernacular culture, interpreting descriptions of rural and urban landscapes in classical and contemporary Arabic literature and analysing visual representations of place in the light of modernizing influences will engage poets, historians, scientists and social scientists as well as artists, architects and urban designers. While some disciplines will contribute to the understanding of the cultural and physical meaning of landscape in the Middle East, designers will play an active and hopefully better informed role in shaping the future landscape.

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Notes

1. The American Society for Landscape Architects was founded towards the end of the 19th century, while the British Institute of Landscape Architects was established a few decades later, changing its name in 1978 to the Landscape Institute.
2. Contributing to the shift were developments in pictorial representation and refinement of linear perspective, input from mathematics, technology and aesthetics which came to articulate the reciprocal influences between garden, literature and painting and mark the subsequent history of landscape design and planning (Weiss, 1998).
3. The absence of a word for landscape is also noted in contemporary Farsi and Turkish. In the former, landscape is generally expressed by two Farsi terms, *baghi sazi* (to make garden) and *muhawata sazi* (to make enclosure), while in Turkey the French word *paysage* has been adopted.
4. *Middle East* is the geographical term used to describe the region that lies at the junction of Africa, Asia and Europe. While the hypothetical boundaries are vague and have varied historically, most studies agree that nowadays the term embraces, as a minimum, the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Turkey (Wagstaff, 1985). The present paper, however, is concerned with the Arab Middle East.
5. The findings of a survey conducted by the author in 1997–1998 revealed that there was no record
of registered ‘landscape architects’ at the Engineering Union in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

6. Koh (1988) proposes ‘ecological aesthetics’ as an alternative that deals with the total perceptual experience rather than the exclusively visual one.

7. In architecture the concept of ‘regionalism’ has been proposed as a reconciliation of tradition and modernity (Frampton, 1996). Numerous examples and variations on the approach can be found in the Middle East and throughout the developing world (Abel, 2000). For a discussion of the relationship between rural landscape and regionalism see Makhzoumi and Pungetti (1999).

References


