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Planting Design: Connecting People and Place by Patrick
Mooney (review)

Emily McCoy

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This might be especially challenging for readers new to the subject matter.

In sum, this is a great edition for visual discourse of climate change. It is unquestionably thought-provoking and calls for a synthesis of knowledge, rationale, and imagination from all disciplines. For landscape architecture professionals, students, and educators, this volume provides sufficient utility for bringing our attention to the aesthetics of the Earth and asks us to consider how far we can and should push the frontiers of design territory in the face of global issues of paramount importance. It also drives us to think about the new roles of design for taking responsibility and caring for environmental externalities and technological legacy as a matter of design. The book is timely, as we are at a bleak moment in human history when we are facing disease epidemics as the new normal. *Geostories* will offer readers a reasonable opportunity to consider the environmental despoliation and ontology and the health of “Gaia-scape.”

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PLANTING DESIGN: CONNECTING PEOPLE AND PLACE

Patrick Mooney. Routledge, 2019.

Emily McCoy

Designing with plants is landscape architecture’s crown and crux. It at once causes an oversimplified understanding of our profession and genuine confusion about the range of what we do, while helping clearly discern our work from that of allied professions. Planting design is also a major source of criticism of landscape architecture education and practice. How can too few landscape architects really know plants, particularly their horticultural characteristics and informed use in planting design, while maintaining a distinction as a professional landscape architect? Alternatively, knowledge in horticulture and planting design has been seen by some as a skill that is optional for practice and can easily be outsourced to other professionals.

Regardless of one’s perspective on the qualifications professional landscape architects should have in horticulture and planting design, many designed landscapes are plagued with monocultures of over-used species, planting failures, carbon-intensive maintenance requirements, and design propaganda where social media outlets enable the promotion of aesthetic fashion in higher esteem than consideration of site-specific environmental conditions. The issues with monotonous planting palettes and planting failure starts with the poor education of designers, clients, land managers, policy makers, and knowledge gatekeepers in academia and a lack of desire to break the business-as-usual mold. Also at fault are professional licensing minimal requirements, the lack of holistic and evidence-based guidance on planting design in the profession, and the desire to wall off skill sets within a practice to optimize efficiency and profit. However, a shifting tide and renaissance for thoughtful and innovative planting design is represented in such notable works as Claudia West and Thomas Rainer’s *Planting in a Post-Wild World*, and this book, Patrick Mooney’s *Planting Design*. These books revive the profession’s regard and craft for planting design and present a new paradigm where landscape architects are no longer forced into choosing between aesthetics or function.

Planting Design offers a digestible and engaging discussion to inspire a new generation of landscape architects and current practitioners in need of a refresh in the art and science of engaging plants to help achieve expressive, emotive, and high-performing landscape design from vision to execution. As quoted by Laurie Olin, “landscape architecture is about not bushes and trees but the shaping of space” (p. 156). In Mooney’s text, design principles of molding space through planting design are carried in unison with research regarding best practices for mental health and well-being and maximizing ecosystem services, something our designed world needs more rigor in among a global pandemic and almost irreversible effects of climate change.

In the surprisingly deficient category of publications that position planting design within the design process in landscape architecture, this text effectively lays the theoretical foundations of the history and research of effective planting design approaches into a succinct framework for use in practice and academia. Commonly found discussions on basic design elements are elevated by a review of case studies from well-regarded landscape architects and designers. These discussions are enriched by inspiring glimpses of a wide range of planting design processes from various design perspectives, including Andrea Cochran, OLIN, Design Workshop, Gertrude Jekyll, Christine Ten Eyck, and Kongjian Yu, which begin to fill the void from existing planting design publications. The discussion of the planting design process reaches a crescendo with a peek into Piet Oudolf’s design process. The reader is left with informative vignettes into Oudolf’s methods—what inspires him, how he achieves different design forms, and clear design principles that are not overly prescriptive, such that one could easily adapt and reinterpret them to their own process.

With beautiful imagery and useful resources outlined at the end of each chapter, *Planting Design* offers students and new designers the confidence to break the mold of toneless and one-dimensional plant palettes. This confidence is inspired by a well-organized common vocabulary at the end of each chapter and links to research that represent some of the best evidence-based planting design. These curated resources for each chapter topic will be invaluable in conversations with clients, colleagues,

and supervisors when trying to convince them to new-to-them approaches to planting design where maximizing beauty and ecosystem services can be achieved in unison.

For all the things this book does well, there are three elements where well-intended design visions can either crumble or thrive in practice that could have been explored in more detail: construction documentation and observation, landscape management, and the role of technology in the design process. The craft of planting design extends beyond the vision and into construction documentation, contractor execution, designer observation during construction, and landscape management investment and skill. Although some of these phases are often beyond the landscape architect’s scope, they are such a pivot point for a project that an honest discussion about failures and successes during those stages would have rounded out the discussion of connecting people and place through planting design and the value of evidence-based design. Furthermore, technological advances can be important aids in the design process as it relates to “right plant, right place” with ever-evolving databases of plant characteristics and new software programs that quickly analyze site design scenarios by modeling environmental characteristics such as microclimate, slope, or hydrology. A discussion of these topics would extend the book’s usefulness to the seasoned practitioner. With the book ending on a chapter dedicated to color, I was left wondering if my copy was missing chapters where these three topics would be logically placed. Even so, for teachers, students, new practitioners, and seasoned practitioners that are in need of a rejuvenation, *Planting Design* will inspire you to infuse research in ecosystem services and environmental psychology into the foundations of aesthetics and beauty in your planting design practice.

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