Critical Reviews
No. 4
Jan 2026
6

Critical Book Review
Is Landscape...? Essays on the Identity of Landscape

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Abstract

The book Is Landscape...? Essays on the Nature of Landscape, edited by Gareth Doherty and Charles Waldheim, is an interdisciplinary collection of essays that engages with the fundamental question "What is landscape?"-without offering any final or definitive answer. The structure of the book is organized around fourteen inquiries, each chapter written by an author from fields such as philosophy, history, ecology, technology, and design. This question driven approach opens new horizons for critical thought, yet simultaneously results in conceptual dispersion and a lack of theoretical cohesion among the chapters.

Moreover, the book marks a shift from the classical discussions of landscape urbanism toward philosophical and cultural reflections, re examining the relationship between design, thought, and lived spatial experience. Chapters such as "Is Landscape Literature?" and "Is Landscape Philosophy?" reveal that landscape is not merely a physical entity, but rather a linguistic, temporal, and experiential domain through which the world can be understood.

This review, while recognizing the innovation of the book's structure and its interdisciplinary richness, identifies its weakness in the absence of theoretical consistency and practical applicability. Within the context of landscape architecture education in Iran, the volume provides a theoretical foundation for a transition from skill oriented to thought oriented approaches, emphasizing that landscape is less a designed product and more a mode of thinking about space, culture, and time.

Keywords:Cultural Construction, Interdisciplinary, Landscape, Representation.

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Is landscape merely a space for viewing, or a way of thinking and understanding the world?

No. 4
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7

Extended Abstract

"Is Landscape…?" is a collection of interdisciplinary essays that transcends purely physical and aesthetic definitions, presenting landscape not merely as an object of contemplation, but as a medium for thinking and understanding the world. Structured around 14 fundamental questions the work cohesively challenges traditional design boundaries, fostering a dialogue between architecture, ecology, and the humanities. Editors deliberately avoid providing a definitive definition, aiming instead to open a space for critical reflection on the role of landscape in contemporary thought. By rejecting the classic binary between the objective physical environment and the subjective lived experience, the text argues that landscape emerges precisely in the interaction between scientific reality and cultural interpretation.

A key strength of the book is its inquiry-based structure, which discourages readers from accepting preconceived notions. However, this plurality of perspectives-ranging from objective engineering approaches to subjective phenomenological views-occasionally hinders the formation of a unified theoretical cohesion. Chapters regarding history and literature demonstrate how landscape evolves beyond physical reality into a narrative and temporal structure for meaning-making. The book is particularly significant regarding "Landscape Urbanism," offering a critical assessment of the reduction of landscape to mere technical infrastructure and emphasizing a necessary return to its cultural and philosophical authenticity. Consequently, the work marks a vital discursive shift: moving beyond the pragmatic concerns of "how to construct space" toward the existential inquiry of "why and with what meaning" we build.

This volume is positioned as a vital resource for shifting landscape architecture pedagogy-particularly within Iranian academia-from a "skill-based" to a "thought-based" paradigm. The review summarizes the work through three main axes: 1) the innovative questioning method that strengthens critical thinking; 2) interdisciplinary richness that expands horizons yet suffers from conceptual fragmentation; and 3) a lack of actionable guidelines for professional practitioners. Ultimately, this book is recommended not for finding definitive answers, but as a theoretical tool for grasping the complexity of landscape's nature and the dynamic interplay between science, philosophy, and lived experience.

The book "Is Landscape…?" is a groundbreaking work for any researcher or designer working at the boundaries between design, environment, and spatial theory. In Iran, landscape architecture education has always faced the challenges of scientific and professional definition at the intersection of disciplines such as agriculture and green space design. This book, with a theoretical and philosophical approach, precisely reveals the existing gap.

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