

Hybridity in Landscape/Architecture

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Abstract: Hybridity as cultural and philosophical concept is very popular in the humanities and design fields today. I propose the value of hybridity as a framework for thinking about design. After signaling the ancient Mediterranean and Roman origins of hybridity in the western world, I make the case here that landscape architecture in particular as a professional design practice belongs, historically and in contemporary terms, to the sphere of hybridity. As one of the most hybrid, complex and ambiguous forms of design, it partners or interbreeds with natural and plant systems, scientific-technological processes, art, architecture, urban spaces, and territorial-geographical systems. As a hybrid, it is also thus one of the most synthetic design practices, in that it often brings most of these dimensions simultaneously together in one work.

Keywords: Hybridity, hybridization, landscape architecture, culture, history, framework, synthesis

1 Introduction

Hybrid, hybridity, and hybridization are words that appear in the work of nearly every discipline today, from biological sciences to humanities and professional practices such as architecture and landscape architecture, and they also surface vividly in digital practices and cultures, as in the current conference on Digital Landscape Architecture 2022. This has been going on for decades, but the speed of appearance is picking up exponentially. In 2014, the first volume of an annual journal about the hybrid web of relationships between linguistic and digital studies was published in Paris, titled *Hybrid: revue des arts et médiations humaines: journal of arts and human mediations*; its seven volumes since 2014 testify to the growth of this scholarly sub-field.¹ Scholars and scientists are tumbling over their words in order to keep up with complexities of use of “hybrid,” for example Christina Sanchez-Stockhammer in her chapter on “Hybridization in language,” in the volume *Conceptualizing Cultural Hybridization* (2012), begins with “Is Hybridisation Hybrid?” While today in the humanities concepts of hybrid are usually associated with cultural theories, in particular post-colonial ones, the hybrid has a particularly long history in the study of biological species, from the time of the first edition of Charles Darwin’s (1809-1882) *The origin of species* in 1859. Darwin asked: “Why should some species cross with facility, and yet produce very sterile hybrids, and other species cross with extreme difficulty, and yet produce fairly fertile hybrids?”² The modern question of hybridization of plant and animal species has occupied botanists and evolutionary biologists ever since.³ Long after Darwin’s day, hybrid has been

¹ *Hybrid: revue des arts et médiations humaines: journal of arts and human mediations*. Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes – Université Paris 8, 1 (2014). See, for example, Vol. 3 (2016), “Digital Cultures: Alternatives,” or Volume 7 (2021), “The Creative Web of Languages”. <https://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/926>, accessed March 7, 2022.

² Cited in: Herbert F. Roberts, “Darwin’s Contribution to the Knowledge of Hybridization,” *The American Naturalist* 53:629 (November–December 1919), 535-554, at p. 537.

³ See the range, for example, among hundreds of studies: Wilhelm Obers Focke, “History of Plant Hybrids,” *The Monist* 23:3 (July 1913), 396-416; Herbert F. Roberts, “Darwin’s Contribution to the

applied to biological, linguistic, cultural and artistic crossing, mixture, and interbreeding. Hybridity in both the arts and sciences today is used as an analogue to describe ambiguity, liminality, multivalence, and fusion. Historians and theorists of politics, society, and culture, whether of Asia, Europe, Africa, or the Americas use the term hybridity to describe minglings of populations and races, transfers of culture, and mixtures of artistic styles.⁴ Historical studies of Mexico and Latin America have particularly espoused hybridity as a name for racial and cultural crossings and fusion, akin to the words *mestizo* and *métisse*.⁵

Overall, hybrid is very popular today and has mostly positive connotations in the Western world. Its western root is in the ancient Greek and especially the Latin word, *ibrida* or *hybrida*, defined as the offspring of two different parents, species, or animals; we will examine further its definitions, below. Hybrid's positive value can stem from its association with enrichment: two, mingled, are better than one. But it was not always so: hybrid as a racial mixture received painful denigration and abasement in the centuries and societies of trans-Atlantic slavery from 1500 to almost 1900, from Portugal and Spain to Africa and the Americas – as well as slavery and its heritage elsewhere in the world.⁶ But, if we turn to literature and the arts today, including landscape architecture, hybridity can be a profoundly compelling concept. I think that it is so for us humans, because of its conceptual ability to mirror the complexity of life and especially to structure and articulate situations of emotional complexity, including works of art. Studying and discussing hybridity can lead us to reflect more deeply on the relationships between our work, our lives, and the larger, often difficult or complicated, issues confronting us worldwide today – a philosophical venture.

Knowledge of Hybridization,” *The American Naturalist* 53:629 (November-December 1919), 535-554; Loren H. Rieseberg, “Hybrid Origins of Plant Species,” *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 28 (1997), 359-389; James Mallet, “Darwin and species,” in: *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Darwin and Evolutionary Thought*, ed. Michael Ruse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 109-115; Richard G. Harrison and Erica L. Larson, “Hybridization, Introgression, and the Nature of Species Boundaries,” *Journal of Heredity* 105 (Special Issue) (2014), 795-809; Charles Stépanoff and Jean-Denis Vigne, Eds. *Hybrid communities: biosocial approaches to domestication and other trans-species relationships* (Abingdon, Oxon-New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁴ For a historian's view, see Peter N. Miller, “Atlantic and Caribbean perspectives: analyzing a hybrid and entangled world,” in: *The sea: thalassography and historiography*, ed. Peter N. Miller (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), 60-83. For a good introduction to a specific historical period and its culture, see Peter Burke, *Hybrid Renaissance: culture, language, architecture* (Budapest-New York: Central European University Press, 2016); for a historian's broad overview, see Peter Burke, *Cultural hybridity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009). For a recent example of art history of the long Renaissance, see Ashley Elston and Madeline Rislow, Eds., *Hybridity in Early Modern Art* (London-New York: Routledge, 2022).

⁵ For example, Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures. Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind. The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization*. Translated from the French by Deke Dusinberre (New York-London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2002); and Marisol De La Cadena, “Are *Mestizos* Hybrids? The Conceptual Politics of Andean Identities,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37 (2005), 259-284.

⁶ For an introduction to these issues, see David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Foreword by David Brion Davis, Afterword by David W. Blight (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2010), “Introduction,” 1-19.

2 Mapping Hybridity's Ancient Roots

Landscape architecture as a professional design practice belongs, historically and in contemporary terms, to the sphere of hybridity. In the rest of this short essay, preface to my keynote for the 2022 conference, I will focus on a few examples of hybridity in landscape architecture: as a historian of that field, I use these examples to teach design students the value of hybridity as a framework for thinking about design. My own scholarly research is on the gardens of early modern Rome, 1400-1800 CE, from vernacular kitchen gardens to elite villas and parks. I use such study of history to illuminate and contextualize the world of contemporary landscape architectural design. What is hybridity? In my keynote, I will map something of that field for you, from antiquity to the present day. Here, I will hint at the ancient origins and their later implications. The original word in the Latin, *ibrida* or *hybrida*, meant lawless, unnatural, unbridled, mongrel or mixture, and, more generally, the offspring of two heterogeneous parents.⁷ There are categories in ancient Chinese, African, American and other cultures that are akin to ancient western hybridity. From the ancient Mediterranean world comes such a hybrid as the Gorgon, or Medusa, part-human female, part-winged bird, a dreadful monster. Numerous Greek and Etruscan examples in terracotta or metal have survived from the 6th century BCE on. They in turn generated the ancient Roman love of hybrids, the multi-formed, mythical creatures that mingle plants, birds, animals and humans, as we see in ancient frescoes, for example from the Golden House of Nero in Rome built 64-68 CE. While the poet Horace and the architect Vitruvius in the early first century CE decried the use of hybrids in painting and architectural ornament, finding them against the laws of nature, contemporaries readily employed such ornaments in their dwellings. These ancient hybrids in turn generated the love of such mingled creatures in Renaissance Italy and especially in Rome, where they were given the name of *grotteschi* or creatures from *grotte* (caves), where Renaissance artists descended into ruined, earth-covered ancient palaces and found them on the walls. From all this derives our modern word, the “grotesque.” The *grotteschi* received three-dimensional expression in the hybrid sculptural creatures in Italian Renaissance gardens, especially those of Rome and Central Italy, for example the colossal sculptures of the *boschetto* (grove) or villa park built 1550-80 by the nobleman Vicino Orsini at his fiefdom of Bomarzo north of Rome.⁸ At the Villa Giulia built 1550-55 on the northern periphery of Rome, hybrid ornaments were both painted and sculpted, as we see in the marble winged harpy – a mixture of woman and bird – sculpted on a fountain basin and the *grotteschi* painted on vaults nearby (Figs. 1 and 2).

⁷ See definitions in dictionaries, for example: Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969), “hibrida” or “hybrida” on p. 852; Giacomo Devoto and Gian Carlo Oli, *Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1971), “ibrido” on p. 1070.

⁸ Hybrids in sculptures and fountain design in Renaissance gardens are thoroughly examined by Luke Morgan, “‘My Proper Flesh’: Hybridity and the Grotesque in Renaissance Landscape Design,” *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*: 31, Translation, ed. Christoph Schnoor (Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress; and Gold Coast, Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014), 155-164; idem., *The Monster in the Garden. The Grotesque and the Gigantic in Renaissance Landscape Design* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); and idem., “‘Nocturnal Fowl disorientated by Sunlight’: Grotesque and Gardens in the Late Sixteenth Century,” in: *Paradigms of Renaissance Grotesques*, ed. Damiano Acciarino (Toronto: Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2019), 401-431.



Fig. 1:
Marble harpy on fountain basin, Villa Giulia, Rome,
1550-55. Photo: author.



Fig. 2:
Frescoed *grotteschi* on vault, Villa Giulia, Rome,
1550-55. Photo: author.

3 From Rome to Hybrid Design Operations

Yet my key concern is not the study of painting and sculpture, but to use such cultural contexts to describe *design* operations of multivalent and multi-functional kinds, hybrids, for

example those where landscape and architecture intersect or merge. I came to this kind of design hybridity from studying the multi-layered, often ambiguous forms of the city of Rome, in particular its ground, layered as we see it in this photograph from about 1860 (Fig. 3). This photo's panorama includes not only a portion of the ancient Via Sacra that leads in the lower left from the Roman Forum to the Colosseum, but also part of the ancient Palatine Hill on the right, where a modern vineyard with its vine-stakes covers ruins of a sixteenth-century grand garden, the Farnese Gardens, which in turn covered part of the ruins of the ancient imperial palaces; and in the distance, a medieval convent in front of the Lateran palace and church, built from the fifth century to the eighteenth. Due to Rome's peculiar state of ruination over time, as on the Palatine, hill becomes building and building becomes hill. Just one view of Roman ground runs the gamut of centuries.



Fig. 3: Robert Macpherson, *The Colosseum, Rome, 1860*, Getty Research Institute. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

Studying Roman villas and gardens, such as the Casino of Pius IV in the Vatican Gardens, built 1560-68 (see Figs. 4 and 5), immersed me in structures that share categories and are multi-valent: here, ground is multiplied from a lower terrace to an upper one, and one above that on the Vatican hill – yielding multiple grounds; the upper ground, although outdoors and open to the sky, is cast as an oval outdoor room, paved like an indoor one and with built-in benches around the oval perimeter. This garden-room's two pavilions open up to become loggias, not fully solid, but not fully transparent, either. One pavilion looks – intentionally – like a giant sarcophagus, a tomb, but it is a villa building for delight, pleasure, sensory experience, for watching the water spray in the central fountain when it is active and spills over onto the outdoor room's oval floor, where unwitting visitors find their feet soaked.



Fig. 4: Casino of Pius IV, Vatican Gardens, Rome, 1560-68. Photo: author.



Fig. 5: Casino of Pius IV, courtyard, Vatican Gardens, Rome, 1560-68. Photo: author.

From my long study of Rome's hybrid ground, gardens, and landscapes, I turned to investigating the meaning of hybridity in a wide range of cultures and designs, including the contemporary design world, which is full of hybrid creations and materials. I wish to help my

students map something of the world in which they find themselves, where hybridity permeates every aspect of design today – from concepts of merging indoors and outdoors, re-conceptualizing threshold and boundary at project and at urban scale, dealing with the ambiguities of ground, to the ancient and very modern notions of changing meanings when materials, designs, and ornament are recycled. Such contemporary designs abound. An example is a village cultural center in Senegal, Africa, designed in 2015 by Toshiko Mori, where roof meets ground, roof is like a textile-curtain of hay, and indoor and outdoor spaces blur. Another is Suzhou Creek housing in Shanghai, China, designed 2019 by Thomas Heatherwick; it is a gardened building concept that plays with the now-popular motif of the urban vertical forest. Mingling urban design and landscape architecture is the Midtown Viaduct, New York City, designed 2019 by DXA studio, to link Moynihan Train Hall with Hudson Yards, by means of a steel pedestrian multifunctional bridge: it merges bridge, pedestrian walkways, garden, amphitheater, and roads.

4 Landscape/Architecture, Hybrid and Synthetic

The very name of the professional discipline – landscape architecture – contains within it a hybrid of two spheres, landscape and architecture. I mark its hybrid status by writing it in the title of my keynote as “Landscape/Architecture.” It was first coined as a term by the American landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, in the 1850s, who felt that “gardening” did not do justice to the multi-disciplinary practice in which he was engaged.⁹ Works of architecture and of landscape design can be artistic works that have ambiguity and hybridity at the center of their conceptualization, for example the Falling Water House of 1935 by Frank Lloyd Wright near Pittsburgh, which is all-in-one a rocky cliff, a waterfall, technologically-advanced cantilever-terraces, and shelter. And landscape architecture is one of the most hybridic, complex and ambiguous forms of design, in that it partners or interbreeds with natural and plant systems, scientific-technological processes, art, architecture, urban spaces, and territorial-geographical systems. It is also thus one of the most synthetic design practices, in that it often simultaneously brings most of these dimensions together in one work. Such “partnerships” of hybridity may take the form of traditional pergolas or trellises in historical gardens or they may be reinterpreted in contemporary forms, mingling industrial relics, pathways, and new planting, as in Peter Latz's Landscape Park Duisburg Nord of 1994 in Germany, or actual pergola forms, as in the 3.5 kilometer-long and 6-meter-high Park Pergola Máximapark created in Utrecht, The Netherlands, by West 8 in 2013-2015. They may also mingle spheres of sea and land, as in Kate Orff's and her firm Scape's Oyster-tecture project devised for the exhibition, *Rising currents: projects for New York's waterfront*, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2011.

And yet our understanding of these contemporary works would be lessened, had we not the rich lexicon of historical examples from which to draw in our analyses. For example, ambiguity and hybridity were particularly favored by the ancient Romans in Italy and the wider Roman Empire, by Islamic garden designers and Italian Renaissance garden designers, all of

⁹ On Olmsted, see Charles Waldheim, “Introduction: landscape as architecture,” *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 34:3 (2014), 187-191. Also see the essays on definitions of the profession of landscape architecture in Gareth Doherty and Charles Waldheim, Eds. *Is landscape...? Essays on the identity of landscape* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).

whom mingled architecture, water features, garden and landscape elements in complex hybrid structures. The social uses of such sites were as multi-functional and hybrid as were the designs. The famous Dining Grotto or Cave of the Emperor Tiberius built 14-27 CE at Sperlonga south of Rome spectacularly evokes this earlier period, in which ancient Romans created seaside dining grottoes in caves that were at once outdoor gardens, permanent garden furniture, fish ponds supplying the dining table, sculpture museums, and architecturalization of natural forms (Fig. 6). Hybrid structures and their social uses can mediate between elements that are very different from each other, as in a street that becomes a ramp and then a bridge that is also a building – an example is the Rialto Bridge in Venice, Italy, built 1588-91. The same obtains at the Pul-i-Kwajuh Bridge over the Zayandeh River in Isfahan, Iran, built 1650, where the bridge is at once a cross-over, a dam, a road, a pair of arcades, belvederes for viewing the river, and a series of piazzas and spaces for public gathering and restaurants. Studying these historical examples enriches our understanding of the hybridity of a site such as the High Line promenade built 2009-14 in New York City, an elevated railway become bridge, public walkway, recreational space, and botanical garden, all in one.



Fig. 6: Seaside dining grotto of the emperor Tiberius, Sperlonga, 14-27 CE. Photo: author.

5 Conclusion and Outlook

To conclude, we can indeed suggest that gardens and landscape architecture are the most richly hybrid of the design arts. They also have a very rich history of representation, from ancient maps and paintings to contemporary digital landscape architecture, which share as well in these hybridities. Both realities and representations need to be contextualized, and the

specific meanings of “what is hybrid?” need to be unearthed for each society and its culture that produce landscape architecture. Renaissance Romans had specific words for hybrids, such as *mescolanze* – mixtures – and *composti* – assemblages. We have our own words for them today. Studying the panoramic history of both the designed sites and their contexts gives the landscape architect a rich range of options and inspiration for design. I will widen that panorama in my keynote address, and also ask the important question for landscape architectural design: what is not hybrid?

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