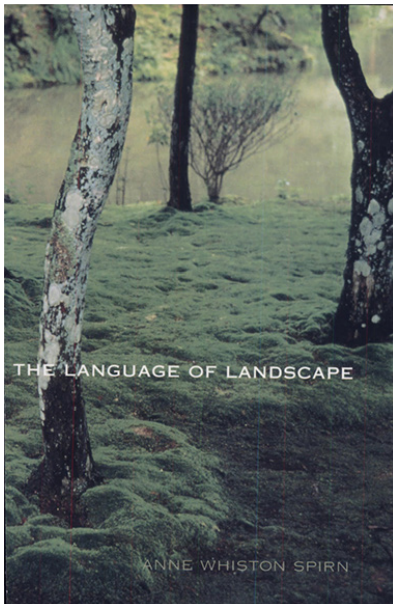


# The Language of Landscape

Author: Anne Whiston Spirn

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Landscape is a complex system. Understanding this system profoundly and involving it in the systematical structure wisely are great challenges for all landscape architects. Towards these challenges Anne Whiston Spirn, professor in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning MIT, makes her conviction that landscape is a language and she elaborates this statement in a gracefully telling book with 326 pages.

This publication is divided into three chapters, respectively explaining what the language of landscape is, what this language consists of, and how it could be used. In the first chapter, Spirn emphasizes that landscape is, like verbal language, self-expression of people and reflection of relationships embedded in context. The author thinks that during human development, landscape shapes us, while we also express ourselves in landscape. The interweaving relationship inscribes environmental and cultural values into landscape, and thus endows it with both practical and metaphorical meanings. The second chapter expounds the composition of this language. Spirn thinks that it consists of elements with functions similar to nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs in verbal language. These elements acquire particular connotations through context. What messages are conveyed and how they are shared, are governed by grammar. The methods of combining individual elements, the rhetoric employed and the ideological agendas promoted in landscape are elaborated in the last chapter.

The greatest contribution of this book is that through the comparison to verbal language it provides a strong framework for reading, understanding and organizing landscape in a many-layered and dynamic rather than in a single and static way. Moreover, it not only puts forward a theory, but also summarizes methods of design through fieldwork and archival research, which in turn deepens the readers' understanding. However, there are also some shortcomings. Firstly, the author gives no logical argumentation line for her core conviction. Clear definitions of language and landscape are not elaborated, similarities and differences of both concepts are not fully analyzed. Proposing that landscape is a language in this case is arbitrary. Another questionable aspect lies in the uneven proportion of selected examples. They focus more on the physical aspects than on the cultural aspects. Physical connections among non-human elements such as plants, sunshine and terrain are often used as examples for showing dialogues in landscape, while how people with different backgrounds express ideas in landscape is less mentioned. Both, however, are pillars for supporting the argument.

In spite of these restrictions, the outstanding contribution of this publication turns it into a classical book worth reading by everyone. Not only can it improve people's ability to appreciate the figurative and rhetorical beauty of landscape, but also help landscape architects shape landscape more knowledgeably and expressively.