Prehistoric Landscapes and the Art of Landscape Architecture

Multiple Locations

Photographs by Alan Ward 1985-2011

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

The landscape designs of Neolithic people that remain evident across Western Europe are a combination of stones and shaped earth laid out in geometric patterns, whose origins are a mystery. This quest for order and permanence was likely in response to their fragile existence, living in a world where the forces of nature threatened survival. The recurring circular pattern of stones designed and built in diverse locations over many centuries implies a fundamental human impulse to make a place, a defined space within a relatively undifferentiated setting, providing these people with a necessary fixture in what otherwise be a vast, boundless landscape. These centers of Neolithic societies are an expression of their commonly-held myths and beliefs in relationship to the land, while it is not clear how they were used, there is an expressive component integral to the designs, that makes them examples of landscape architecture. Before exploring their interpretation as works of landscape architecture and the expressive aspects of the sites, what are the organizing principles and characteristics of these designs on the land?

A linear alignment of three thousand stones, 4km long at Carnac in Brittany, is the largest surviving example of prehistoric standing stones (1-6). Carbon dating has established that the construction of the site began about six thousand years ago. One of the oldest stone circles in Britain is Castlerigg, dating from around 3200 BC, now part of the Lake District National Park in Cumbria in northwest England (7-8). Castlerigg is located on a plateau amid mountains. While standing within the slightly imperfect circle, there is a solemn quality in the open landscape of meadow and stones at this elevation, framed by the surrounding peaks with intervening mist and clouds, that still resonates to a contemporary viewer. The most significant prehistoric site in Scotland is Kilmartin, near the Inner Seas on the western coast (17-20). Within a 10km radius, there are twenty-five sites with standing stones. Kilmartin has evidence of human habitation for the last ten thousand years in a valley with a flat expanse of farmland, estuary, and bog, surrounded by mountains. The existing stone circles, linear standing stones, earthworks, and cairns date from about four thousand years ago.

Avebury is a henge complex with a stone circle, earthen banks, and paths in the Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire (9-15). It was built between 2600 to 2400 BC, now overlaid with landscapes from later centuries. What we see of the circle today is the result of restoration efforts in the 1930s. Many of the stones had been buried, removed, or destroyed beginning in the medieval era because of their association with paganism. The village of Avebury grew around the site with settlement patterns within and outside the circle that date back to at least the early Saxon period, around 600. A church from the 12th century is visible from within the circle. Equally mysterious is nearby Silbury Hill, which is part of the Avebury complex, located about 900m to the south (16).

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

From certain vantage points, the view of Silbury Hill is dramatic in its obvious built form emerging from the flat pastoral landscape. Why was it constructed at this location, rather than on higher ground, which would take advantage of existing topography? Construction of the 40m high earthen mound is estimated to have begun around 2400 BC. It is calculated to have required eighteen million hours, or the equivalent of seven hundred people for ten years. It was an enormous construction effort for a structure whose purpose still remains unknown, as the builders left few traces in the archeological remains. To the contemporary viewer, it appears as a modern example of sculptural land art, shaped into a pure form in the landscape. The site for Stonehenge, also in Wiltshire in the midst of the openness of the Salisbury Plain, may have been selected for its prominence; most of the region was forested at this time, except for the chalk downs at this location (21-22). Up close, Stonehenge is focused on the sanctum, or sacred space inside the circle, carved out from the more profane landscape. When the eternal regularities of nature were the dominant reality surrounding life, the stones were aligned and oriented to the natural cycles of the sun and the more varied patterns of the moon.

The geometric pattern of stones at each site probably defined some version of a gathering space serving multiple functions, perhaps a ceremonial space for rituals, burials, a place to mark the natural cycles of nature, or at times, also serving as a market place. The linear alignments at Carnac and Avebury may have defined ceremonial paths for rituals or burials. There had to be greater motivations and symbolic meanings associated with the sites, because they were such enormous undertakings to move such large stones, build earthworks, and continue to expand these sites over hundreds of years. This aim to make symbolic forms is a distinguishing feature of humankind, a basic need that was expressed in these built landscapes.

Surveys of the history of architecture typically include Stonehenge and other Neolithic structures in the initial chapter, however in my view, these are works of landscape architecture. The first two comprehensive histories of landscape architecture, *Design on the Land* by Norman T. Newton, and *History of Landscape Architecture* by George B. Tobey, did not include these sites. What makes them examples of landscape architecture? I think it is useful to look beyond the history and theory within the discipline of landscape architecture and take a broader and more comprehensive view. Landscape architecture, like architecture, should be considered among the arts, because of the expressive and metaphoric intentions evident in these designs on the land. These ambitious building efforts go well beyond making changes to the land for the practical outcomes that arise from agricultural field patterns, roads, hedgerows and the like, to be a built

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

form that had meaning to Neolithic people. Without the expressive aspects, then the constructed changes on the land should be considered planning, site, or engineering works, not works of the art of landscape architecture. By being considered among the arts, a work of landscape architecture is invested with meaning and significance, but what meaning, and how is it conveyed? Esthetic experience occurs in encounters with art, so the human interaction with a work of landscape architecture is a certain kind of perceptual transaction with an esthetic dimension. It is a transaction, because it first involves the individual and their own distinctive history and background, that directs their perception outward to encounter art objects. The art objects in the transaction with landscape architecture at these sites include the basic elements: stones, landforms, plants and related site features. However, to qualify as art, these elements also need to be signifiers of something more in this perceptual transaction.

These societies created myths that gave order to the world that were expressed and exhibited in built landscapes. The sites reflect a desire to leave something tangible and permanent as an expression of stability and as a visible manifestation of continued survival in their conceptual scheme of the world. The myths were embedded in their language and in their stories. However, the built landscapes expressed their myths in a presentational form, rather than language or discursive form, which is stringing together a series of words, one after the other, to convey thoughts. A designed site in these examples, is not a story, which is in words, rather it is a presentational form, like all the arts, given all at once, in a tangible way through the art of landscape architecture.

There are commonly-held myths and values expressed in the landscape in traditional societies that have been identified by researchers across several disciplines, including historian of religion Mircea Eliade, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and geographer J. B. Jackson. A stone circle embodies the divinely inspired origins and values of a society, which would have had a hierarchical organization of space that was expressed with a circle at the center. Each society believed that they are a unique people and landscape, and valued the place where these myths are formalized and visible at the center of community, expressed by a monument, landmark, or site, or a combination of these elements, by making a circle of stones. What is the significance of the embankments encircling Avebury and Stonehenge? Boundaries and limits are important elements, more than mere objects; they serve as metaphors for a society wishing to retain and strengthen a hierarchy of place and position. A path can have symbolic power in signifying the connection between sacred places, the myth of creation, or return home. While lacking clear evidence, these beliefs and values were likely shared by these Neolithic societies.

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

The making of these landscapes which signify values and express feelings and emotions about the myths and beliefs of these societies is specifically the purpose of art. A work of art, such as a circle of stones and earthen embankments at these sites, are expressive metaphors for their society and their distinctive place on the land. However, the stones and earthen embankments, in and of themselves, do not make these sites works of art and landscape architecture. It is both the experience of the expression of values, along with the objects that signify the values, that together make it a work of art. Philosopher Everett W. Hall in *What is Value?* would call this a fact-value amalgam. The facts consist of the things in the landscape; the values are signified by the things in a human transaction or occasion, when experiencing the site. This is consistent with the point of view put forward by John Dewey in *Art as Experience*, where art is defined by the kind of experience one has, rather than defining art by the characteristics of its medium, or who is the maker, or artist.

Do these sites still express values that resonate with a contemporary viewer, and are they still experienced as works of art? There is something about the human predicament that suggests that these designs on the land still address some of the fundamental questions that confronted prehistoric people. What is the human relationship to the land? What is our relationship to nature and the patterns of the sun, moon and stars, even if our lives are no longer dictated by these rhythms? What are the centers, or distinctive places, of our society where the commonly-held beliefs are made visible? How do paths express direction and orientation?

The circle of stones expresses the fundamental human desire for order and to make such a center in the built environment; therefore, Avebury and Stonehenge may still echo within us, in making a place in an otherwise, undifferentiated landscape. Having direction and orientation along a path in the landscape is a basic characteristic of existence, and one of the great original symbols, recurring in myths across time. These Neolithic societies signified the natural processes and cycles that dominated their lives with the layout of a circle corresponding to the patterns of the sun and moon, however the circle also expressed a consciousness of their existence and survival, and appears at the center of their lives to provide stability and as a fixture against the passage of time, a place that expresses the continuity of their society and their lives. These are fundamental questions about how we exist, one of our conditions being that we live on the land. Landscape architecture expresses values about how to live on the land, and is an art that points to a more ideal way of building in relationship to the earth and its natural processes. These sites continue to provide inspiration from building in an artful way on the land.

List of Photographs

1. Menhir de Champ Dolent, Carnac, Brittany, France, 1988
2. Standing stone, Carnac, Brittany, France, 1988
3. Rows of stones 4km long, Carnac, Brittany, France, 1988
4. Stones and farmhouse, Carnac, Brittany, France, 1988
4. Rows of stones, Carnac, Brittany, France, 1988
5. Rows of stones and meadow, Carnac, Brittany, France, 1988
6. Carnac stones, Carnac, Brittany, France, 1988
7. Circle of stones, Castlerigg, Lake District, UK, 1998
8. Within the circle, Castlerigg, Lake District, UK, 1998
9. Moat/ditch and circle of stones, Avebury, Wiltshire, UK, 1998
10. Circle of stones and church, Avebury, Wiltshire, UK, 1998
11. Markers for missing stones, Avebury, Wiltshire, UK, 1985
12. Stones in 340m diameter circle, Avebury, Wiltshire, UK, 1985
13. Single stone and moat/ditch, Avebury, Wiltshire, UK, 1985
14. Earthen embankment, Avebury, Wiltshire, UK, 1985
15. West Kennett Avenue to Silbury Hill, Avebury, Wiltshire, UK, 2011
16. Silbury Hill, Avebury, Wiltshire, UK, 1998
17. Standing stones, Kilmartin, Scotland, UK, 2000
18. Standing stones and cairn, Kilmartin, Scotland, UK, 2000
19. Standing stone and cairn, Kilmartin, Scotland, UK, 2000
20. Ring of stones at cairn, Kilmartin, Scotland, UK, 2000
21. Stonehenge in the Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, UK, 1998
22. Stonehenge, Wiltshire, UK, 1998

Notes

Selected Publication of the Photographs:

*Ward, Alan, "*Photographing the Layers: Landscape Designs of Britain"
Land Forum 01, May/June 1999

There are three teachers to whom I owe, directly or indirectly, the material for the thoughts included here. Professor William Widdowson taught a class in Architectural Theory in the Department of Architecture at the University of Cincinnati. I referenced my notes from his class taught decades ago to inform the ideas summarized in *Notes on the Making of the Photographs*. He led me to read about the psychology of perception, theories of art and esthetics, including Susanne K. Langer's definition of art, as well as theories about signs, symbols and values. I was a student in J. B. Jackson's class in his last year teaching in Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard. His research on the meanings of landscape led me to explore his extensive and extraordinary writings. As a student teaching assistant in John Stilgoe's first lecture class, and through his books, I gained a much deeper appreciation for the history and language related to the landscape, and the value of direct experience of the world.